

POINTS OF VIEW

A TIMELY QUESTION, OR RATHER DILEMMA: QUO VADIS?
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA – MENA,
REGION AND PEOPLE

In a (*sui generis*) diplomat's DOSSIER:
TAKEAWAYS and TALKING POINTS

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PART II

Motto:

“If you have been following recent events in the Middle East and you are confused by the tangled web of wars and proxy wars, sectarian splits, revolutions, and counter-revolutions that are convulsing the region, do not worry. You are not alone. Policy makers, prime ministers, and presidents alike have been wrong-footed by the dizzying speed of change as the order in the Arab world collapses and a new one fights its way into existence. The post-Arab Spring Middle East is rife with contradictions, inconsistencies, and the kind of complications that make your head spin. Finding your way through this labyrinth is no easy task.”¹

MENA – “A centennial portraying”

Motto: *“An introduction into the Middle East in the twenty-first century will have to grapple with the Arab uprisings that are transforming the region in profound ways. It is still unclear what long-term impact these popular revolutions will have, but it is clear that the game has changed, and that the Middle East will never look quite the same.”² “The chronically combustible Middle East.”³*

At the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first-century, a potentially memorable time for MENA, this region emerges, in our view, as *a compound of multilayered and contradictory narratives*. What appears on the strategic, diplomatic and academic radar, and, also, looking more attentively, under that radar, is *the perennial feature of MENA as probably the most earthquake-prone region of the world, in political, social, economic, cultural terms*. It is here that one could have met, up to the present, a unique mixture of fault-lines: ethnic and racial, with the

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¹ M. E. McMillan, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

² Lucia Volk (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 38.

³ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/opinion/john-kerry-what-we-got-right.html?_r=0.

corresponding Babel of languages, religious, political and institutional, human (under)development, national (in)stability, violence and conflicts. The result, be it on a short, medium or a longer term: a multifaceted area where start-up initiatives, based on the latest IT & communication technologies, with *Israel as the uncontested pioneer*⁴, without ignoring “*Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt: (as) a new global hub for social impact start-ups*”⁵, does not exclude intensive tremors from various political, social, cultural and economic directions and sources.

Against this backdrop, when they are not focused on the ever glittering and expanding “wonders” of Dubai & Abu Dhabi & Doha, the media news and reports, and even many of the studies published under the aegis of reputable think tanks, are inclined to present a quite one-sided image of the MENA region, a kind of “unilateralism” radiating a pessimistic if not downright negative connotation, leaving aside the root-causes of the events: “*When reporting on the Middle East and North Africa, television news channels often focus on religious divisions, violence, and the actions of political parties. When attempting to uncover the reasons for unrest, the media often ignores the most basic issues – that people want a living wage and security on the streets.*”⁶

Of course, there are plenty of other assessments, coming from people whose “minds and hearts”, “forged” by both MENA’s and world realities, have accumulated enough specific arguments in support of a different judgment. Not necessarily completely positive, but at least an objective one, based on a more balanced vision and approach.

In any case, contextualization become essential. A first and really critical one is given by the fact that the years 2014-2022 could be considered a time of anniversary – for MENA, along with other important parts of the world, Europe, first of all, marking a century after the First World War. That “Great War” which, through its unfolding on the ground and the resolutions & treaties concluded and ratified at the ensuing final Peace Conferences, but also actions taken secretly or unexpectedly, behind closed doors – most notably, the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and the Balfour Declaration (1917)⁷, with such a radically impact on the fate of MENA: “*The Middle East became what it is today... the old order in the region (was) irrevocably destroyed.*”⁸

A “*New Middle East*”, literally and figuratively, was born then and the path of modernity and larger and deeper modernization was opened for the region, knowing that Egypt had entered that path approximately one century before, and

⁴ Remembering a line from a great poem by Walt Whitman: “*We take up the task eternal, and the burden, and the lesson. Pioneers! O pioneers!*”.

⁵ <http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/business/tunisia-morocco-and-egypt-a-new-global-hub-for-social-impact-start>.

⁶ Philip Steele, *Behind the News. Uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa*, New York, Crabtree Publishing Company, 2017, p. 13.

⁷ “*The Balfour Declaration “demonstrates Britain’s vital role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people”*”, British Prime Minister Theresa May told the Conservative Friends of Israel. This year’s anniversary is one “*we will be marking with pride*”. March 17, 2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/instead-of-celebrating-the-balfour-declaration-britain-should-be-ashamed-of-what-it-did#page2>.

⁸ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace. The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*”, New York, Henry Holt and Company, Paperback 2009, p. 563.

Tunisia circa 50 years earlier⁹, but, with the end of WWI came the time for most of the Levant/ Middle East *per se* to do the same, plus the Arabian Peninsula. However, it raises the question whether such a trend will be accompanied by “*the more general question of whether the transplanted modern system of politics, with their secularism, their nationalism, their alliance system – will survive in the foreign soil of the Middle East*”¹⁰.

Well, the ways in which answers to that very question emerged, as evidenced in today’s region-wide realities associated with those more locally circumscribed, have led to a centennial commemoration not too celebratory, maybe not at all. Facts and evolutions on the ground have compellingly pointed to an incomplete/ unfinished/ syncopated, if not outright failed modernity, nurturing today, one century later, one hope only: to see a (*New*) *New Middle East* emerging.

If the need is to temper the apparent absolute nature of such a conclusion, an appropriate “cure” had already been offered by Michel Foucault: “*I am asking myself if modernity couldn’t be envisaged rather as an attitude and not as a period of history. By attitude, I understand a way of connection to the reality: a voluntary choice done by somebody, a manner of thinking and feeling, also a way of acting and directing oneself, marking a belonging and, at the same time, presenting itself as a task*”¹¹. And “attitudes” had made a good part of the “luggage” brought by the Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt, and “dis-charged” over there for good (see the above quotation from Bernard Lewis). Only that, “*As it turned out, the autocratic modernizers failed to usher a majority of their wards into the modern world, and their abortive revolutions from above paved the way for more radical ones from below, followed, as we have seen in recent years, by anarchy. There were many reasons for this, ... some part of the legacy of imperialism – the division of the Middle East into mandates and sphere of influence, the equally arbitrary creation of unviable nation states ... (some linked to the fact that) “the postcolonial world had to telescope into two or three decades the political and economic developments that had taken more than a century to unfold in both Europe and America.*”¹²

In his “*Inside the Middle East*”, literally and figuratively, Avi Melamed presents “*a Middle East that has been changing dramatically, but, paradoxically, a region that is both ‘new’ and ‘old’*”¹³. For other analysts, a *New Middle East* is already there: a rapid research of the *Amazon.com* website would reveal (as of March 2017) the existence of not least than 25 books published from 2011 to 2016 (in English, plus 2 in French) that have in their titles the phrase “*The New Middle East*” (3 more announced for 2017). Without any doubt, such books are

⁹ “*The modern history of the Middle East, according to a convention accepted by most historians of the region, begins in 1798, when the French Revolution, in the person of General Napoleon Bonaparte and his expedition, arrived in Egypt, and for the first time subjected one of the heartlands of Islam to the rule of a Western power and the direct impact of Western attitudes and ideas.*” Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, New York, Perennial/ HarperCollins, 2003, p. 130.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 563-564, 569.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “*La critique, une attitude de modernité*”, Hors-série L’OBS no. 92 mai-juin 2016, *Les Lumières un héritage en péril*, 1984, p. 42.

¹² Pankaj Mishra, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

¹³ Avi Melamed, *op. cit.*, pp. 261-262.

the result of good will and hard work. Only that they risk looking, at least partially, with being “contaminated” with the new virus labelled “post-truth”. In particular if they are confronted with other recent assessments, especially those coming from the region itself.

Rami G. Khoury, a scholar *cum* journalist with roots in the region, when warning the new American administration that they would meet “*a very wild Mideast*”, was “inspired” mainly by the present *Arab realm* – i.e. the area claiming the majority of MENA’s territory and population: “*The Arab condition is embarrassing, and will only improve over time when more competent leaders assume office and more democratic systems allow citizens to participate in state-building in a more meaningful...*”¹⁴ Dlawer Ala’ Aldeen, the Founding President of the Middle East Research Institute, a policy research institute and think tank based in *Erbil, Kurdistan Region (KR)* of Iraq (meri-k.org), proceeding to “a bird’s eye view of the Middle East landscape”, saw: “*a region now riddled with conflicts, wars, and on-going crises. Too many weak or failing states struggle to cope with internal divisions, corruption, and radicalism, or with polarization between unrelenting regional powers. There are demographic changes, destruction of historic cities, and disintegration of ancient communities. This is a Middle East in a traumatic transition between two orders, one dominated by superpowers and a new one increasingly defined by various regional powers.*”¹⁵ As for the official realm, taking the floor at the 2017 Munich Security Conference during the session with a title that couldn’t be more challenging – “*Old Problems, New Middle East*”, the ‘Chief diplomat’ of Saudi Arabia said: “*Our region is rife with turmoil. We have a crisis in Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen, Libya. We have an Iran that is rampant in its support of terrorism and interference in the affairs of other countries. We face terrorism, we face piracy, we face challenges of economic development and job creation. We face challenges in terms of reforming our economies and countries and bringing the standard of living of our people to a higher level. We have the challenge of trying to bring peace between Israelis and Arabs. So other than that, I guess, our region is a wonderful place.*”¹⁶

Translated into cooler scholarly analysis, that euphemistic phrase *a wonderful place* means that, for the Arab world, the dystopian system, initiated one century ago with the Sykes-Picot agreement has reached the stage of the sub-regional (Arab) collapse. Several factors relating to this are reviewed in a special report published by *The Economist* in May 2016: “*First, the region’s autocratic political model has failed, though monarchies have stood up better than republics. Second, the rentier economic system, based on natural resources, has become unsustainable, not just in oil-producing states but everywhere. Third, Islam, and the Sunni variety in particular, is in tumult over the place of religion in politics and the role of jihad (holy war). And fourth, destabilizing interventions by*

¹⁴ Rami G. Khoury, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/surviving-the-transition-in-the-middle-east>.

¹⁶ <https://www.saudiembassy.net/remarks-foreign-minister-adel-bin-ahmed-al-jubeir-munich-security-conference>.

America have been followed, under (former) President Barack Obama, by destabilizing detachment from the region.”¹⁷

Almost at the same time, and as a “signpost” for the impending encounter of the new US Administration with a “wild Middle East”, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, under its Middle East Program and multiyear Arab World Horizons project, published the report “*Arab Fractures: Citizens, States and Social Contracts*”¹⁸. As an overview, “*The Arab region, riven by authoritarianism and religious extremism, has struggled with a perfect storm of local and global challenges—technological and demographic change, regional turbulence, oil-revenue declines, conflict and foreign intervention, and the legacy of decades of authoritarianism and economic mismanagement. The result is the most destructive period in the Middle East since the establishment of modern Arab states after World War I.*” Dealing with the drivers of instability in region, Carnegie’s document underlined that, “*the spread of sectarianism, radicalization, and terrorism (which) cannot be understood—let alone countered—without understanding the catastrophic institutional failures which gave rise to them in the first place*”.

One year before, the “portrayal” of MENA, made under the aegis of the Brookings Institution¹⁹, was not much different: “*The modern Middle East has rarely been tranquil, but it has never been this bad. Full-blown civil wars rage in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Nascent conflicts simmer in Egypt, South Sudan, and Turkey. Various forms of spillover from these civil wars threaten the stability of Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have risen to new heights, raising the specter of a region wide religious war. Israel and the Palestinians have experienced a resurgence of low-level violence. Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have weathered the storm so far, but even they are terrified of what is going on around them. Not since the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century has the Middle East seen so much chaos.*”

If one year couldn’t be enough for a relevant change in MENA, the very particulars of that region mean that even a period of 5-6 years would not suffice: “*When the ‘Arab Spring’ erupted in December 2010, advocates for change in the Arab world had reason to be hopeful. But, as we continued to see in 2016, authoritarianism has returned, most notably in Egypt.... Meanwhile, Syria has been so ravaged by civil war, vast refugee outflows, war crimes, and human rights violations that it will take at least a generation to rebuild that country and its society – that is, if it can ever be rebuilt. Yemen, for its part, is being sundered by civil strife and a Saudi Arabian-led military intervention; and, since Muammar el-Qaddafi’s overthrow in 2011, Libya has remained a deeply divided, largely ungoverned country. And, of course, no one can ignore the rise of the Islamic State. Tunisia is often seen as the Arab Spring’s one “success” story. But while its democracy has miraculously survived in the midst of so many failures elsewhere*

¹⁷ *The war within. A special report on the Arab world.* “The Economist”, May 14th 2016, pp. 3-16.

¹⁸ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/01/arab-fractures-citizens-states-and-social-contracts-pub-66612>.

¹⁹ <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/02/16-americas-choice-in-middle-east-pollack>.

in the region, Tunisia is not exempt from geopolitical forces that burden its security apparatus and threaten its economy”²⁰

Eventually, “The modern Middle East is like 17th-century Europe, enmeshed in violent and costly, political and religious struggles within and across borders that could well last for three decades longer.. Civil wars fuelled by outsiders with religious and political agendas tend to end for one of several reasons: order is imposed by one side or a third party, or the sides settle, usually out of exhaustion. Alas for the Middle East, no such scenario seems imminent.”²¹ Thus, we cannot but be entitled to ask ourselves, together with Daniel L. Byman, “What year is it in the Middle East?”: somewhere between 1618 and 1648, or in 1848, or 1916? Anyway, “a muddled, conflicted, and chaotic Middle East (as it appears now), it could mean that, comparatively with other parts of the Planet, 2017 has not yet arrived for the region in case”²².

Fortunately, the *dark rhymes* marking for the recent iterations in MENA’s History may have a *counter-rhymes* for the future, however uncertain: “The Arab Spring is far from over. Like the French Revolution, it could play out over decades and reshape the region... the basic drivers of the Arab Spring remain. Indeed, they have become more acute. And even though some people have had enough of chaos and protesting, others are not giving up.”²³ Another argument that MENA’s social and political environment is a friend of the long term approach: “The Arab world is since 2011 in transition, albeit one that is likely to continue to be bloody and brutal. It may well be a transition in cycles, some of which may be regressive rather than progressive on Lenin’s principle of two step forwards, one step backwards. What is nevertheless clear is that the status quo ante is history and change is the name of the game.”²⁴

Undoubtedly, in order to be complete, our “centennial portrayal” of MENA needs to include, together with the Arab realm, the other two civilizational, political and economic poles of the region, namely, Israel and Iran. For Iran, the “personal” picture continues to be dominated by the fallout of the Islamic revolution of 1979, with many areas of shadow if not outright darkness, but also with some rays of light, as underlined in a special report included in the April 2016 edition of the French weekly *Le Point*²⁵. The Israeli part looks much more livable in terms of religion, politics, and societal dynamics. Accordingly, the word *change* has pervaded for some time the verbal description of many aspects of Israel’s internal situation, a demonstration in this regard being the entire special section *The Struggle for Israel*” in a recent number of FOREIGN AFFAIRS²⁶, especially

²⁰ <http://www.globalgeopolitics.net/2017/01/20/the-middle-east-s-next-moment-of-reckoning/>.

²¹ Richard N. Haass, *Decades of Deadly Conflict Will Spread Across the Middle East*, March 26, 2015; <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/decades-deadly-conflict-spread-across-middle-east/p36348>.

²² Daniel L. Byman, *What year is it in the Middle East?*, in “The Brookings Institution”, Middle East Politics & Policy, Oct. 5, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/10/05/what-year-is-it-in-the-middle-east/>.

²³ <http://www.politico.eu/article/arab-spring-not-over-repercussions-for-middle-east-region-unrest/>.

²⁴ http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/opinion/the-post2011-arab-world-change-is-the-name-of-the-game_45726.

²⁵ *Le nouvel Iran*, En Couverture, “Le Point”, 7 Avril 2007, pp. 26-45.

²⁶ *The Struggle for Israel*, “Foreign Affairs”, Volume 95, Number 4, July/ August 2016, pp. 2-57.

“The End of Old Israel”, one of the seven articles included, written by an Israeli personality, Aluf Benn, Editor in Chief of *Haaretz*. Congruent in ideas and conclusions are those of another distinguished Israeli, a former foreign minister and now a commentator, who doesn’t avoid using, in February 2017, terms reserved for other ares of the world, as in an article titled *“Illiberal Israel”*, justified from the very beginning: “... *Israel is succumbing to its deepest ethnocentric impulses, and is now well on its way to joining the growing club of illiberal democracies.... Over the course of 11 years as Israel’s prime minister, Netanyahu has reshaped the country’s collective psyche. He has elevated the isolated, traumatized “Jew” – still at odds with the “gentiles,” not to mention the “Arabs” – above the secular, liberal, and globalized “Israeli” envisioned by the country’s founding fathers.*”²⁷

If the direction of the change Israel is undergoing is in the best interest of its people it is for them to acquiesce. Or, that could be a matter of specific “question-dilemma” when it could be seen as one of the slogans raised during a demonstration (“un-authorized”, as the Police stated): *“The state of Israel persecutes Jews”*²⁸.

The overall complex and contradictory current developments and expected evolutions of MENA make necessary, in light of our stated purpose – a more in-depth understanding of MENA, to explore also those factors, of a tangible and intangible nature, which appear as shades making the regional tableau more nuanced, even if more intriguing, in some areas, or mind boggling in others.

A first category of factors pertains to the interplay of *paradigms*, relatively few and resilient (in the range of *war, violence, instability* and so on)²⁹ – *metaphors*, seemingly more diverse and dynamic. Thus, while *“Middle East on fire/ burning/ in flames”* could prove “the immortal metaphor” for that region, there is a recent phrase with the semblance of a “perfect metaphor” – *“The Perfect Storm”*: *“The region is being battered by a perfect storm of powerful trends. This is what has driven demonstrators into the streets of Tunis, Cairo, and cities throughout the region. The status quo is simply not sustainable”*, said the then US Secretary of

²⁷ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/illiberal-democracy-israel-netanyahu-by-shlomo-ben-ami-2017->

²⁸ *Thousands of ultra-Orthodox take to streets in mass anti-draft protest*, “Times of Israel”, March 28, 2017; http://www.timesofisrael.com/thousands-of-ultra-orthodox-take-to-streets-in-mass-anti-draft-protest/?utm_source=Tony+Blair+Faith+Foundation&utm_campaign=db79f7bc3e-

²⁹ *“The Arab uprisings of 2011 heralded that the past paradigms had broken, but this created a scramble for new paradigms, and to date no new paradigm has emerged as paramount. The old paradigm of repressive authoritarianism and quiescent populations, in exchange for socioeconomic development, broke down in the face of slow and unequal economic growth, growing popular empowerment, and worsening government corruption and repression. The initial uprisings inarticulately threw up outlines of a paradigm of democratic, pluralistic, and socially just government. The Muslim Brotherhood proposed a paradigm of Islamist government... Arab public opinion was resonant with a loose paradigm of popular empowerment and accountable and inclusive government; today it is a bickering Babel of competing paradigms. Until the region settles on a governance paradigm-as Western Europe did, albeit after centuries of conflict-this cacophony of visions and ideologies will continue to bedevil the region. In the long run as this century develops, democratic and inclusive government-whether as constitutional monarchy or republican democracy-will probably be the only sustainable paradigm.”* Paul Salem, *The Middle East in 2015 and Beyond: Trends and Drivers*, “Middle East Institute” (MEI), Washington, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/middle-east-2015-and-beyond-trends-and-drivers>.

State, Hillary Clinton, in a speech to the 2011 Munich security conference. And, from then on, until today, we can say that stormy times it has been in MENA.³⁰

With reverberations and aftershocks tangibly induced into “a sister calamity”: the “Perfect storm” in “neighboring” Europe, which is eruditely discussed in a book published in 2016 by the Institute of Political Studies and International Studies of the Romanian Academy.³¹

And when MENA is not “battered” by one “perfect Storm” it could be “shaken” by several storms, in one area or another of the overall region, as is the case, once again, of the Arab realm: “*The Arab countries have been buffeted by three simultaneous storms that added internal challenges to the external ones. The first was the so-called Arab Spring and its consequences, whether in the form of collapsed states or the considerable toll paid by the countries that managed to weather this storm. The second is the cyclone of radical terrorist groups that have spread their corruption politically and militarily in the Arab region. The phenomenon may be at its most flagrant in the so-called “caliphate” that straddles Syria and Iraq, but the other forms that have infested other Arab countries wreaked no less attrition on resources and capacities. The third is the storm of plummeting oil prices depriving many Arab countries of important resources and capacities they could otherwise have mustered against the two other storms. The three storms combined lent added impetus to regional challenges and opened previously unavailable opportunities to various countries outside the Arab region.*”³²

Altogether, it is very much in relation to MENA that one can grasp that essential dimension and function of the metaphor, so remarkably observed by Viorella Manolache, as “*a bridge from geopolitics to geopoetics*”.³³ A 2,500 years old “bridge”, given Herodotus’ branding of Egypt as “*a gift of the Nile River*”.

A region which is covered at least half by desert, couldn’t miss in nuancing its tableau with the geopoetic value of “sand(s)”. Thus, just one month before seeing “the perfect storm” battering the region, the same former American “Chief diplomat” warned that, “*... in too many places, in too many ways, the region’s foundations are sinking into the sand. The new and dynamic Middle East that I have seen needs firmer ground if it is to take root and grow everywhere*”³⁴. Especially when projected into its inescapably particular dynamics, the sand of

³⁰ The metaphor in case has been instrumentalized by scholars and commentators: “*Perfect Storm: The Implications of Middle East Chaos*” (Report, July 2015, “The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies” (BESA Center); Ross Harrison, a scholar with MEI, wrote, in May 2015: “*The multiple crises afflicting the Middle East have now reached a critical inflection point. The region is undergoing the proverbial perfect storm*”. “*A perfect storm brews in the Middle East*” was the title of an article published in Feb. 2015, by David Ignatius, underlying that, “*The ‘perfect storm’ metaphor is overused. But one may be brewing in the Middle East as Israeli, American, Palestinian and Iranian interests collide in a vortex.*” “*Here’s why Saudi Arabia is caught in ‘perfect storm’*”, tried to demonstrate CNBC in Sept. 2015.

³¹ Dan Dungaciu, Ruxandra Iordache (Coord.), *Furtună perfectă în Europa*, ISPRI Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016.

³² <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/>.

³³ http://revista.ispri.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/70-77Manolache_70-77Manolache.pdf.

³⁴ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/01/154595.htm>.

MENA has the potential to lead to radical changes: “*Shifting Sands: The Unravelling of the Old Order in the Middle East*”³⁵. That with a warning for the main international player in the region: “*Shifting Sands: The United States in the Middle East*”³⁶, addressed even to the new Head of State: “... a president that promised fewer entanglements could find himself sinking deeper and deeper into Middle Eastern quicksand, squandering blood and treasure and inciting regional blowback with no end in sight.”³⁷

Syria, whose territory is covered by a lot of sand, has come to validate the respective metaphor, which in fact was added to others not less relevant for the country in question: “*the beating heart of the Arab world*”, to become “*The Arab World’s Broken Heart*”³⁸, after six years of internal strife and fragmentation.

Second category of factors: further on the labyrinthine drive towards better understanding MENA, we arrive at a particular and inescapable juncture – a legion of pictures/ photos, prevailing the disheartening ones, a huge accumulation of images of MENA’s events, people and places, mainly of the last two decades, as a new proof, if necessary, that a photo/ picture is equivalent of 1000 words. Especially when some of the photographs, also take the present viewers to other areas, and other tragic times: the photo of the Syrian cities of Aleppo and Homs, panoramas of ruin spread in all directions, the ghost of vibrant communities, blown apart in body and spirit, as a reminder of the German city of Dresden 70 years earlier. Was it that History repeats itself or it just rhymes? Not to speak about photos of children from Syria and Iraq, Yemen or Gaza Strip, are they dead, or (just?) injured or fleeing without any clear destination and time horizon. Sources of so many hard questions for modern humanity, which seems to have failed to make real at least the pompous assertion of *creative chaos*: “*If you have a strong enough stomach, and you make yourself look at the photos, you can see the bodies of dead children, arranged like sardines, under a threadbare quilt. You can read the accounts of how they died: writhing, choking, gasping or foaming at the mouth, killed by a substance so toxic that some rescue workers grew ill and collapsed from proximity to the dead... How many images of toddlers struggling to survive in the wake of a chemical attack can the world take?*”³⁹

Third category of factors, directly linked to the second one: the complex admixture of emotions and feelings inner to the region’s realities and evolutions. Region-wide, many of MENA’s current problems do have “*emotional dimensions*”⁴⁰ even if

³⁵ Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson (Editors), *Shifting Sands: The Unravelling of the Old Order in the Middle East*, London, Profile Books, 2015.

³⁶ Joel S. Migdal, *Shifting Sands: The United States in the Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.

³⁷ Colin H. Kahl, *Like Middle East Wars? You’re Gonna Love President Trump. With zero public debate, the new president has thrown America back into the Mideast quagmire*, “Politico”, April 05, 2017. http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/like-middle-east-wars-youre-gonna-love-president-trump-214985?wpm=1&wpisrc=nl_todayworld.

³⁸ Paul Danahar, *op. cit.*, Chapter 8, *Syria: The Arab World’s Broken Heart*, pp. 369-420.

³⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/05/inaction-syria-chemical-weapons-attack-terrible->

⁴⁰ Dominique Moisi, *The Geopolitics of Emotion. How Culture of Fear, Humiliation and Hope are Reshaping the World*, London, The Bodley Head, 2009.

the issues are not emotional themselves, like “*Jerusalem is an emotional issue and one the Sunni Arabs can't really ignore*”⁴¹, as well as, “*...there always had been two Jerusalems, the temporal one and the spiritual one, both governed more by faith and emotion, than by rations and facts.*”⁴² A conspicuous confirmation that, “*in the Middle East, as we know, memories are like vast minefields, lying in wait, marking people's wrong steps.*”⁴³

For the Arab world in particular, “*the importance of emotional connections should not be underestimated. Arab culture and society are tribal, and values of devotions, loyalty, and obedience to the leaders are deeply rooted.*”⁴⁴

The prevalence of two feelings, namely *hatred and pain*, do have historically deep roots in MENA; in his *Histories*, Publius Cornelius Tacitus had said: “*Against Judea, Caesar Titus included in his army a unit of Arabs who were imbibed with a hatred which was customary among neighboring peoples against the Jews.*”⁴⁵ At the other end of an ark of almost twenty centuries, after Caesar Titus, the Prime Minister of Israel reminded how “*painful*” could be the example of his people: “*I know they say that time heals everything. That is not true. The years go by and the pain remains... (and) on Memorial Day, our private pain turn into national grief.*”⁴⁶ The complexity of the emotional paradigm in the case of Israel is further elaborated by Christopher L. Schilling in his book “*Emotional State Theory: Friendship and Fear in Israeli Foreign Policy*” (Lexington Books, 2015). Eventually, the State of Israel could be considered “*another strategically important country that defies easy classification in terms of emotions. ...there is a combination of fear, hope, and humiliation... it has a difficult, ambiguous relationship with Europe and exhibit an intense vulnerability based on a sense of being encircled by hostile forces even as it boast of being the unrivalled economic and military power in the region.*”⁴⁷ Also, from a spiritual perspective, it appears that, “*the more you know about the Jewish past, the harder it is to avoid the inheritance of sorrow that is an essential part of Jewishness... For 2,000 years, Jews have been struggling to figure out a way to remember their sorrows while continuing to lead full lives.*”⁴⁸

Of course, a picture including Israelis and Palestinians would make the emotional picture of MENA even more convoluted: “*In its origins, the Arab-Israeli conflict was a struggle between two peoples fighting over the same land: an objective conflict... Yet, in the course of time this core has been enlarged by other dimensions that have developed, some of them also objective (territorial*

⁴¹ <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2016/1222/Would-a-US-embassy-in-Jerusalem-bring-peace-to-the-region?mpid=ema:nws:Daily%2520Newsletter%2520%2812-22->

⁴² Montefiore, Simon Sebag, *Jerusalem – The Biography*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2011 (Translated into Romanian language: Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Ierusalim. Biografia unui oraș*, Editura Trei, 2012), p. 20.

⁴³ Karber, Phil, *Fear and Faith in Paradise. Exploring Conflict & Religion in the Middle East*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012, p.13.

⁴⁴ Avi Melamed, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁴⁵ Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Istorii*, Paideia Publishing House, Bucharest, Reprint 2010, p. 227.

⁴⁶ Paul Danahar, *op. cit.*, pp.183-184.

⁴⁷ Dominique Moisi, *op. cit.*, p.128.

⁴⁸ Adam Kirsch, *Why Jews are Forbidden to be Happy*, March 28, 2017, http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/228224/daf-yomi-195?utm_source=tabletmagazinelist&utm_campaign=eafe8a2a7b-

disputes) but many of them belonging to the “subjective” realm: emotions and passions..., demonization of the enemy, misunderstanding and prejudice, ethnic hatred, etc. It could even be argued, perhaps, that the subjective factors have become, if not the core, of the conflict, then at least the major obstacles to its resolution.”⁴⁹

In more general terms, *fear* – defined by H.P. Lovecraft as “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind” – has had a particular trajectory in the recent history of Middle East. Thus, in the case of Egypt, the most densely populated country in MENA (90 million people living on only 60,000 sq.km., even if the total area of the territory is over one million), the initial stage of the Arab Spring seemed to have demolished “the barriers of fear” so solidly entrenched by the authoritarian regime. But, just two years later, the analysts were looking for an answer to the question: “Why fear explains the failure of Egypt’s revolution”.⁵⁰ Syria has also been a fertile terrain in a real explosion of the feeling of fear: “The surprising ways fear has shaped Syria’s war”⁵¹, hence “Narratives of Fear in Syria”⁵². Interestingly enough for the Syrian conundrum is the nexus *fear* – *trust*: “The Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad has harnessed the anger and fear over terrorism and sectarian civil war both inside the country and internationally, and channeled these emotions into his narrative of continuity and stability. So one of the most striking consequences of the conflict – beyond the death and destruction – is the complete breakdown of trust within Syrian society. When or if peace does return to Syria, it is trust – rather than the bricks and mortar of cities – that may be the hardest thing to rebuild.”⁵³

The fourth category of factors: the cognitive train in the case of MENA, given its kaleidoscopic nature, seems destined to include a series of “special wagons”, marked “cognitive dissonance”. They are rather numerous and here we present just a few examples: when the leaders of the small, but ultra-rich state of the UAE declare, on the most serious possible note, that, “The next Emirati goal is to reach Mars. The driving force behind the Mars program are young Emiratis in their 20s and we are proud of them.”⁵⁴, one can have yet another measure of the immense distance between that part of MENA and the dramatic developments in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

Just a few hundred kilometers from the Gulf, there is an ultimate image of a fatal “Bermuda triangle” for the destiny of those important countries and their millions of innocent inhabitants, not far from the still ongoing Iraqi predicament. While important cities in that area, some of them millennia old – Mosul, Aleppo,

⁴⁹ Alan Dowty, *Israel/ Palestine*, Third edition, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2012, p. 265.

⁵⁰ Ellen Lust, Jakob Mathias Wichmann and Gamal Soltan, *Why fear explains the failure of Egypt’s revolution*, “The Washington Post”, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/01/25/why-fear-explains-the->

⁵¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/24/the-surprising-ways-fear-has-shaped->

⁵² Wendy Pearlman, *Narratives of Fear in Syria, Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 14, Issue 01, March 2016, pp. 21-37. <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=6&fid=10236992&jid=PPS&volumeId=14&issueId=01&aid=10236991&bodyId=&membershipNumber=&societyETOCSession=&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S153759271500320>.

⁵³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/08/syria-civil-war-post-factual-conflict->

⁵⁴ <http://stepfeed.com/dubai-s-sheikh-mohammed-just-delivered-his-most-powerful-speech-yet-3837>.

Homs, Tripoli, Sana'a – have been leveled, at least partially, during the last few years, by ferocious bombardment done by various forces, from their own government armies, to rebel groups, to external countries/ coalitions, well, against such a dramatic juncture, Saudi Arabia has been erecting the tallest building in the world – one km. high, so, finally, the Emirates' Burj Khalifa (828 meters, the tallest building in the world and the tallest man-made structure of any kind since its completion in January 2010), finally, will rank just second.

When, at the end of 2016, the region and the world were preoccupied with the destination and welfare of the thousands of people, including many children, fleeing the bombarded and besieged city of Aleppo, in northern Syria, the media from the Gulf were presenting in detail the possibilities, in terms of restaurants, clubs and so on, for partying at New Year. Almost concomitantly, on an evening in December 2016, while people were being slaughtered in Aleppo, the Syrian Symphony Orchestra held a classical concert conducted by Missak Baghboudarian in the Damascus Opera House.

Also, while in February 2017, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) held a full-day “*World Happiness meeting*”, as part of the “*World Government Summit*”, UN had launched a call for aid to avoid the specter of starvation as the largest humanitarian crisis in 70 years, having at its core the situation in a country situated in the neighborhood of the UAE – Yemen, where “*more than seven million people are hungry and did not know where their next meal would come from*”.

Cognitive dissonances with “roots” in MENA could be found thousands of miles away: in March 2017, the US Senate approved the proposal of Trump's Administration for the new American ambassador to Israel, a person known as “*a staunch supporter of Israeli settlements (a critical issue) that previous American governments had viewed as obstacles to Middle East peace*”⁵⁵.

Back to MENA, everybody hailed Saudi Arabia when it started the creation of “*girls' councils*”, as part of the efforts to boost the participation of women in the workforce. But, when the governor of Qassim province held a much-celebrated first meeting of the new girls' council there was one thing missing: girls. The host sent out in front of the media 13 persons, all men, transforming the council from a symbol of Saudi progress into a viral joke: the reformers have run head-on into the kingdom's ultra-conservative codes – basically, no women can sit in the same room with an unrelated man, so the women were reportedly in another room, watching the meeting *via* a video link.

The fifth category of factors regards the nature of truth in relation to MENA and its problems, and it is here that one can speak of a (new) domain of MENA's “pioneering”. Long before the “*post-truth*” “official birth” and vocabulary validation, in 2016, and the date 2016-2017, with TIME's cover “*Is Truth Dead?*”⁵⁶ (April 3,

⁵⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2017/03/23/senate-confirms-david-friedman-as-ambassador-to-israel-with-little-democratic->

⁵⁶ As a landmark of this fatidic (our) time, the illustrious TIME magazine considered that it wasn't enough to publish an interview with the new American President, but, in addition, to issuing a material, as a kind of warning: “*The Facts Behind 5 Claims President Trump Made in His Time Interview on Truth*”. <http://time.com/4710931/donald-trump-time-interview-facts/>. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/britain-police-say-attacker-acted-alone-but-have-arrested-7-in-sweeps/2017/03/23/178100f4-0f98-11e7-9b0d-d27c98455440_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-banner-low_

2017), MENA's narratives frequently had the appearance of being intoxicated with "my truth" versus "your truth", as well as "hard truth" & "uncomfortable truths" and so on. Issues that continues to permeate the MENA narratives at different levels.

On the one hand, and with a higher degree of generalization, we have a kind of truth which could be a rather "uncomfortable" for the West after its decade-long dealings with the Middle East: "*The uncomfortable truth is that Western leaders want stability in the region more than they want democracy. They want the oil to flow, the chokepoints of global trade to stay open, and Israel to be safe. They will support whoever can achieve that...*".⁵⁷ Hence the no less "hard" conclusion on the fate of democracy in large areas of MENA: "*In the twenty-first-century Middle East, democracy still comes a very distant second to long-entrenched interests*"⁵⁸, whether they are the Western interests in the region, or just ones of a "local nature".

On the other hand, the confessions, which proved quite frustrating, made by John Kerry, the former head of the American diplomatic service, on his experience with peace efforts in the Middle East: "*It's a hard thing to be the messenger of truth because it quickly gets distorted into one sentence or one attack... Regrettably, some seem to believe that the U.S. friendship means the U.S. must accept any policy, regardless of our own interests, our own positions, our own words, our own principles – even after urging again and again that the policy must change... Friends need to tell each other the hard truths, and friendships require mutual respect... So it is vital that we have an honest, clear-eyed conversation about the uncomfortable truths and difficult choices, because the alternative that is fast becoming the reality on the ground is in nobody's interest – not the Israelis, not the Palestinians, not the region – and not the United States.*"⁵⁹

Maybe, John Kerry would had been less frustrated had he adopted the attitude of the (former) American Vice-President towards the Israeli Prime Minister ('Bibi'): "*'Bibi I don't agree with a damn thing you say but I love you.*"⁶⁰ The Israeli side could reciprocate even more acidly, but with the same hardly understandable cognitive dissonance between two close allies: as the last Report on the situation of the human rights in the world, published in February 2017 by the Human Rights Bureau of the US Department of State, contained some unpalatable assessments for the Israeli side, commentators not only put the classic question *qui prodest* – "*really, who needs it?*", but they came also forward with their "modest proposal" in the context of the Trump Administration's plan to slash funding for the State Department: "*Kill the department's human rights bureau.*"⁶¹

⁵⁷ M. E. McMillan, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 234.

⁵⁹ <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/01/267073.htm>; <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/12/266119.htm>.

⁶⁰ <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/10/politics/biden-netanyahu/>.

⁶¹ <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/foreign-policy/middle-east/israel/u-s-human-rights-report-travesty->

Consequently, the many and consistent efforts aimed at blurring the truth in the MENA region can lead to a strange, to say the least, situation: “*Never before in the history of conflicts we had so much information as to what is happening, yet know so little.*” Hence, “in the fresh spiritual light” coming from Washington, the same commentator could only conclude that “*Syria’s civil war is a post-factual conflict*”. Reminding also that The World Economic Forum has warned of the dangers of massive digital misinformation, “*In Syria’s post-factual conflict misinformation is rife... In a post-factual conflict all sides utilize media and social media to reinforce fearful conspiracy theories to render facts irrelevant.*”⁶² Going from one particular case – Syria, to the level of MENA, “... probably no region in the world is so chock-full of virulent, politically correct mythology, distortions, and cover-ups that combine religion, race...”.⁶³

Challenges and chances of the passage to MENA 2.0.

Motto: “*There’s one thing those of us who follow Middle East policy closely over the last several years have been humbled to learn and relearn, (and that) is how little in control we can be of events and how things will come up and in many cases literally blow up in our faces.*”⁶⁴

Attempts to foresee MENA’s future are not completely discouraging, be they in the medium or the longer term. It is true that they seem crystalized around two directions, in a sort of duality.

The first direction is where pessimism seems *de rigueur*. And not without strong argument. A reference “package” in this regard could be found in the *GLOBAL TRENDS. PARADOX OF PROGRESS*, a publication of the US National Intelligence Council (January 2017)⁶⁵. *Middle East and North Africa’s prospects*, enjoying a rather generous space from the total 226 pages of the Report, are approached on two levels (the issue of terrorism is dealt with separately):

“Near Future”: a few excerpts from a lengthy and in-depth projection: “*Virtually all of the region’s trends are going in the wrong direction. Continuing conflict and absence of political and economic reform threatens poverty reduction, the region’s one recent bright spot. Resource dependence and foreign assistance has propped up elites even as it fostered popular dependence on the state by inhibiting markets, employment, and human capital. With oil prices unlikely to recover to levels of the oil boom, most governments will have to limit cash payments and subsidies...*”⁶⁶

⁶² James Denselow, *Syria’s civil war is a post-factual conflict*, 3 August 2016 .
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/08/syria-civil-war-post-factual-conflict-160803075226372.html>.

⁶³ Martin Sieff, *The Politically Incorrect Guide™ to the Middle East*, Washington, Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2008, p. 1.

⁶⁴ <http://mepc.org/hill-forums/us-commitments-middle-east-0?transcript>.

⁶⁵ *Global Trends. Paradox of Progress*, a publication of the US National Intelligence Council (January 2017) <https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/documents/GT-Full-Report.pdf>.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 38-39.

“The Next Five Years”: a few excerpts from also a lengthy and in-depth projection: *“Political upheaval will characterize the next five years in the Middle East and North Africa, as populations demand more from entrenched elites and civil and proxy wars are likely to continue in a number of failed states. Contests among religious and political forces are likely as low energy prices weaken institutions. Such contests are likely to include security competition among Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and perhaps Egypt, and could involve China, Russia, and the United States...”*⁶⁷

A second direction in projecting MENA’s future appears more hopeful, even without being an unreservedly optimistic one. Thus, *“beyond the fire drill approach to the region’s problems”* and acknowledging the region realities in all intricacies, more balanced assessments seem justified: *“The Middle East is witnessing the unraveling of a century-old political order, an unprecedented struggle for power within and between states, and the rise of extremist elements that are exacting a devastating toll, yet, at the very same time, parts of the region are rapidly modernizing, seeking to provide better opportunities for their young people, and experimenting with more active roles in the Middle East and the world.”*⁶⁸

The idea that the future could bring better things for MENA *under certain circumstances* is strengthened in a number of other documents and studies: *“There is nothing in or about the Middle East that condemns it to failure, or that other regions have not overcome... there is much about the region—starting with its people—that inspires hope. There is thus a strong case that MENA societies are ripe for economic revolution, possessing the youth, vitality, and drive required to transform themselves into dynamic innovation economies. But these conditions will not result in innovative economies by themselves; smart policies, ranging from education and skills training to intellectual property protection to the right investments, will be required.”*⁶⁹

In fact, even the above-quoted American NIC’s Report contains some positive openings for MENA: *“Nevertheless, despite these pressures, a low-probability, more beneficial scenario for the region might emerge if oil markets tighten and prices begin to rise. Leaders in Iran and Saudi Arabia would feel less pressure to focus on a zero-sum competition for oil market share, which could result in a lowering of their sectarian rhetoric. Better bilateral relations could defuse their proxy wars and help stabilize the region, potentially helping create the conditions for grassroots movements to offer a compelling and constructive alternative to authoritarianism or ISIL and Islamic extremism. A genuine public dialogue and economic development that is consistent with religious and other cultural norms could channel the frustrations that underlay the Arab uprisings of 2011.”*⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 107-112.

⁶⁸ *Middle East Strategy Task Force*, Final Report of the Co-Chairs, Atlantic Council, November 2016; http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/MEST_Final_Report_web_1130.pdf.

⁶⁹ *Mediterranean Futures 2030: Toward A Transatlantic Security Strategy*, January 2017; http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Mediterranean_Futures_2030_web_0201.pdf.

⁷⁰ *Global Trends. Paradox of Progress*, pp. 112-113.

As for the inventory of conditionalities and necessary steps included in the road map for a “*New New Middle East*” the myriad of studies and reports on the future of MENA, underline that that the list cannot be completed without citizens and states forging new social contracts, establishing accountability and energizing systemic political and economic reform, while regional leaders need to begin formulating their visions for a post-conflict Middle East. For the region’s monarchies, this might mean increased power-sharing to give citizens a greater voice in political affairs through elected parliaments and advisory councils, both local and national. In North African republics, such as Algeria and Egypt, this might mean a firmer separation of powers, such as the parliamentary system in Tunisia, so that no single political institution or constituency can dominate. In once-unitary states riven by internecine conflict, such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, more dramatic changes may be necessary to allow regions and local communities greater latitude in managing their own affairs and to offer physical protection for minority groups.

Whatever aid and cooperation from outside the region, it is undisputable that no scenario on MENA’s future will be a Pollyanna-ish narrative. An adage of Socrates – “*The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new*” could be of help in channeling the efforts of the forces at play in the Middle East. Only that “the old” seems to be over there a survivalist *par excellence*, given its deeply rooted and consequently capable of collecting varied deep “nutrients” – in terms of religious, social and traditions norms and practices.

Whatever the risk of infringing “*political correctness*”, with already questionable “standards”, we cannot stress enough that reform, in spirit and practice, as a conditional resetting of the modernity/ modernization of MENA, should not ignore the religious dimension of the life and fate of MENA, and that including Islam, as the faith of the majority of the population there. Think only of the risks of keeping the unproductive status of the Middle East as a zero-sum conflict between Shia and Sunni powers. Religion, Islam in case, if it wants to prove its moral status in the twenty first century, should also think about reforms. More so accepting that, “... *the religion of Islam itself is indeed capable of reformation, if only to distinguish it more clearly from the political ideology of Islamism. But that task of reform can only be carried out by Muslims. Happily, there is a growing number of reformist Muslims.*”⁷¹

Revolution 2.0 could be an inspiration and an enticement. Just one year after the start of the Arab Awakening/ Spring, the Egyptian Wael Ghonim published a book under the title *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People Is Greater Than the People in Power: A Memoir* (London, HarperCollins, 2012). Wael, one of the region’s digital pioneers – launching many firsts in the tech industry, including some of the region’s most important websites until he landed at Google as the Regional Marketing Manager for the Middle East and North Africa – had been the creator and manager of the Facebook page which expanded its following quickly and

⁷¹ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *The Challenge of Dawā. Political Islam as Ideology and Movement and How to Counter It*, http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/ali_challengeofdawa_final_web.pdf.

moved from online protests to a non-confrontational movement, practically becoming the means of broadcasting the first call for the January 25, 2011 uprising in Egypt. Ghonim elaborated more in his book on the role of the Internet in formenting and supporting the protests behind the Arab Spring, presenting in concrete terms how a social issue can make the leap from the Internet to real life in the streets, and, once the ideas from the Internet were grasped by the people, even closing down Internet providers couldn't stop the people. The struggle had made the leap from cyber space to real space.

As such, Wael Ghonim and his narrative epitomized not only the transformation of an apolitical man from comfortable executive to prominent activist, but also the coming-of-age of a young Middle Eastern generation that has grown up in the digital era. Indeed, it is a story larger than an individual experience: *“During the Arab Spring, change came quickest in countries with the highest use of digital media. Why was this? Texting, blogging, and social media sites can spread the word, helping to organize demonstrations and making it possible to assemble protesters in a flash..., video clips were then picked up by mainstream broadcasters.”*⁷²; *“The Arab Spring may have taken the world by surprise in 2011, but another upheaval had long been underway in the region. It is a media revolution that, through satellite television and the internet, had connected people from the Atlantic to the Gulf like never before, has smashed political taboos, had eroded the cults of personality nurtured by authoritarian rulers from Damascus to Tripoli, and had helped to empower civil society movements that are the bedrock of democracy.”*⁷³

Undoubtedly, *“the role of the Internet and related digital platforms is part and parcel to the current events of the Arab world”*, and that is going to continue given the ever expanding of the technical infrastructure: in May 2015, a report titled *“Turn_Around_and_Go_Back”* estimated that there were 157 million Internet users in the region, stretching from the Atlantic to the Gulf, about three times as many users as there were in 2009. About half had Facebook accounts (six times more than in 2009); seven million people use Twitter in Saudi Arabia (prince al-Walid ibn Talal invested three hundred million dollars in Twitter), and four million use it in Egypt.⁷⁴

Not only that, the same commentators who acknowledged how the Internet appeared useful as *“an engine of revolution and change”*, and that *“the social media can facilitate rebellion and even topple regimes”*, couldn't refrain to ask themselves if *“social media can help to build new governments”*. Unfortunately, as the Arab realities of the 2010s demonstrate, *“building new governments”* seems less in the “purview” of the social media, in the sense of practical capabilities.

Instead, the Internet has become the instrument of *choice* for the ISIS propaganda machine, which has been releasing thousands messages a day on Twitter, Facebook,

⁷² Philip Steele, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29, 32.

⁷³ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring. Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2012, p. 46.

⁷⁴ Avi Melamed, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

YouTube, and other media, a proof of “*ISIS’s mastery of the Internet*”.⁷⁵ In the same context, a *Virtual Caliphate* could not be excluded as a eventual reincarnation of the self-declared Islamic State.⁷⁶

On the other hand, “*Facebook hurt the Syrian Revolution: social media made the Syrian revolutionary movement less resilient and more exposed to regime brutality; it gave the Syrian people the hope that the old dictatorship can be toppled just by uploading videos of protests and publishing critical posts. Many were convinced that if social media helped Egyptians get rid of Hosni Mubarak, it would help them overthrow Bashar al-Assad. It created the false illusion that toppling him would be easy and doable. Social media didn’t highlight the differences in the political structures of Egypt, Tunisia and Syria.*”⁷⁷

Beyond such “unilateral” usage of the Internet, MENA offers also “lessons” on its “bilateral engagement”, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular the Israeli Army (IDF) – Hamas, the Palestinian organization in the Gaza Strip, provides a true “case study” with the title “*How Israel and Hamas weaponized social media*”: social media has become a continuation of war by other means, by virtual means as well as the latest tool both sides reach for as they vie constantly for the world’s sympathy. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) now probably has the biggest social media presence of any military worldwide. If compared with Israel’s level of technological sophistication, the Palestinian side, in particular, Hamas which is ruling Gaza, is much smaller and far more modest in its social media coverage. But, what appears as an essential common denominator is that what both sides are doing is primarily propaganda; there are going to be times when they state information that has facts in it, ‘a rocket landed here,’ ‘a certain person was killed’, but, most of their efforts seem to be rallying patriotic or national support for their followers. Meanwhile, it’s a zero-sum conflict: in January 2017, there were even official news from IDF that Hamas used fake social media accounts to hack Israeli soldiers’ phones. The ease with which it is possible to set up an internet offensive infrastructure, the culture of sharing information and the insufficient awareness to the security threat online creates vulnerability, became a lesson learned even by the most sophisticated army in the region.⁷⁸

Revolution 2.0, as a paradigm of MENA’s rapid and deep assimilation of modern communication technologies could undoubtedly be considered a forerunner for *MENA 2.0*, i.e. a region re-immersed in the modernity and modernization processes. And without ignoring the lessons of what happened a century and a half ago: when modern technologies started being adopting and implemented in the Ottoman Empire, that seemed easier compared with the parallel process of reform and changes in the social and political areas: “*Britain and France both brought modernity into the*

⁷⁵ Robert F. Worth, *A Rage For Order: The Middle East in Turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS*, London, Picador, 2016, p. 179.

⁷⁶ General Joseph L. Votel, LTC Christina Bembenek, Charles Hans, Jeffery Mouton and Amanda Spencer, #*Virtual Caliphate. Defeating ISIL on the Physical Battlefield Is Not Enough*, Center for a New American Security (CNAS), January 12, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/virtual-caliphate>.

⁷⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/12/facebook-hurt-syrian-revolution-161203125951577.html>.

⁷⁸ <https://www.cnet.com/news/how-israel-and-hamas-weaponized-social-media/>.

Middle East, which came in the form of the products of industrial age – not least, to begin with, greater wealth and superior military technology. It also came in the form of modern way of thinking that emphasized organization, efficiency, discipline and the importance of achieving concrete results in every endeavor”.⁷⁹ While these two dimensions of “the exported Europe’s modernity at the time” were disseminated, however slowly and gradually, through the region, “its third aspect – liberal and progressive political philosophy that stressed liberty, individual human rights” were far away of finding any chances implementation here, a fact that was recognized by the “European exporters themselves”.

The deeply rooted practices of ruling, including the relations between the power and the army, some of them maintained up until today, were the main obstacles on the way toward a full and real modernity. That doesn’t mean that “ideas” from the Western portfolio of modern thinking didn’t spread among “Arab thinkers” who debated on the best strategy for adopting modernity, starting seeking independence and “confronting the Western powers on the basis, in part, of Western ideas of freedom”. And today, as the mixed, at best, results of the Arab Spring have underlined, the old paradigms of power and force in many parts of the region are as entrenched as ever, despite some oases of hope, such as Tunisia: *In essence, all the problems in the Middle East come down to that one core issue – the massive gap between power and the people. Until that is resolved, until the people of the Middle east feel they have a stake in the governance of the Middle East, until they are left alone to work out how to achieve it, what is going now will continue. And the gap between power and people will continue to be filled by the status quo kings, generals, and sheikhs on the one hand and the likes of ISIS on the other. Except that each new incarnation of the extremist ideology will be more violent than the last.*⁸⁰

Moreover, as long as modernity/ modernization for the Middle East area, but not only there, is equated with “westernization”, today’s travails with regard to Western/ modern civilization’s basic tenets could represent a kind of “*shifting the goal posts*”, a development with a wide array of consequences in the philosophical and scholarly field, and dangerous effects in the concrete reality of MENA’s path to re-entering the modernity process. “*Perhaps the processes unleashed by the West in other civilizations are now unleashing similar processes in the very heart of the West... What that process has done, in the past year or so, is destroy a lot of our old categories of thought and familiar oppositions: liberalism versus fundamentalism, secularism versus religion, Islam versus modernity. What we are witnessing today is the turbulence and turmoil that we used to locate in Iran or Iraq, India or Egypt, erupting in the heart of the modern West.*”⁸¹

Against that unexpected backdrop, particular problems for MENA, like “*Should the new state/ political and societal dispensations be based on religious or secular principles?*” could remain longer without a firm answer, with the implicit potential

⁷⁹ Dan Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁸⁰ M. E. McMillan, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

⁸¹ A conversation with Pankaj Mishra, author of *Age of Anger*...., in *BBC World Histories*, Issue 2, 2017, p. 89.

of deepening political divides and unrest. At the end of the day, the fact that, “both sides – the Islamists of the Arab Spring, and those who feel religion should be kept out of government – will have to compromise to find ways to live together”⁸², sounds like a rational approach. But, that very rationality seems to be in short supply in a world infused by the ideology of the “post-truth”, populism and anti-globalization. The anti-democracy voices in MENA cannot but rejoice at hearing such alarm bells: “Western democracy seems trapped in a conundrum. The system falters when voters cannot make informed decisions based on candidates’ platforms.”⁸³

Consequently, more than ever, MENA needs an additional and determined inward looking vision and approach. First, if on March 20, 2017, in an address to the UN Human Rights Council, UN human rights chief Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein (a Jordanian) described the war in Syria as “the worst man-made disaster since World War II” there should be no doubt that “the man/men” invoked should be looked for, before anything else, inside the region, in Syria itself, within the large array of those involved, from the highest political leadership and the official army, but also the myriad of armed so-called opposition and guerilla groupings, to the apparently “mute” Islamic religious leaders, be they Sunni, or Shi’a & Allawis, or Druze.

Second, in the spirit of Socrates’s adage “to focus all of your energy on building the new” we think that MENA has got both the interest and energy to re-new itself, in the sense of “man-made re-building”. A matter of “minds and hearts” which could be, for instance, synergistically nurtured by Israeli technologies, with Gulf’s capital, and re-energized deep moral commandments of the three monotheistic religions born here. A matter of peoples’ actions, leaders included, but based on sound and productive principles and ideas. Indeed, MENA region should be approached as a generator and crucible “not just of sad, terrifying events but of the power of ideas and their role in the existential battles that have shaken the foundations of the Middle Eastern order”.⁸⁴ In this context, a productive set of ideas of the interplay past-present-future of MENA region could be inspired by the answers to a set of questions, as discussed in a seminal book⁸⁵: “What went wrong?” – “Who did it to us” – “What did we do wrong?” – “How do we put it right?”. With the warning: the four questions, in particular the core one – “How do we put it right?”, have largely remained unanswered since they were raised, for the first time, by Bernard Lewis, more than 15 years ago. Possible cause: they are part of the heavy “baggage” of existential “dilemmas-questions” with which MENA

⁸² Philip Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁸³ Shlomo Ben-Ami, *Living With Populism*, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/exploitative-versus-enlightened-populism-by-shlomo-ben-ami-2017-03>.

⁸⁴ In January 2017, when his highly acclaimed book *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping the World* (St. Martin’s Press, 2016) was nominated for an outstanding prize, the author, Shadi Hamid, with deep roots in MENA, said: “This book is an attempt to make sense not just of sad, terrifying events but of the power of ideas and their role in the existential battles that have shaken the foundations of the Middle Eastern order.” https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2017/02/07/brookings-expert-book-lionel-gelber-prize/?utm_campaign=Foreign+Policy&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=42402990.

⁸⁵ Bernard Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

region has been travelling for the last century. Unfortunately, at least some of those – people & leaders, states & organizations – who were supposed to unknot them have been doing exactly the contrary. Not forgetting *the Greek Chorus in MENA's modern drama*, a drama whose end, as of spring 2017, is not predictable, much less to envisage the reconstruction and nation-building decisions and practical means. As such, our cognitive train for a better understanding of the region will have to stop here for re-charging with a view to a future journey.

*Instead of CONCLUSION: In the Neighborhood,
Romania and MENA – Centennial Trajectories
A Pool of Lessons (To Be) Learned*

The chances made for both Romania and MENA at the end of the Great War marked new eras in their History, in a sense opening and strengthening their modern trajectories. Some of their fundamental turning points were either common, or similar/ close enough in substance and timing, like the Second World War, the Cold War, and authoritarian political regimes.

Meanwhile, Romania interaction with MENA had several particularities in terms of both policy – for instance, Romania was the only country from the former socialist fold which never broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, and, second, the economic and cultural exchanges, involving, among other aspects, the flow of Romanian engineers and workers towards Arab countries within many economic-technical cooperation projects, on the one hand, and the flow of thousands of young Arabs to Romanian universities, many of them under scholarships from the Romanian Government.

For the last two decades of this Century, in particular with the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 and, respectively, the Arab Revolution/ Awakening/ Spring starting in December 2010, one can speak also of the accumulation of a shared pool of experiences and lessons that we outline as following.

Radical and irrevocable change is possible only when people and their elites are organically interlocked, and aware of a long, painful and difficult transition. As the new Tunisian president warned: *“The people think that the problems will simply disappear after the revolution. But they don't, they only change.”*⁸⁶ Indeed, even if, at a certain moment, the light could be seen at the end of “the tunnel”, equally real could be “the process of the never ending tunnel”, for an unforeseeable period of time, concomitantly with varied, possibly uninterrupted, tremors – social, religious, political, economic, as well as chaos and the effective destruction of landmarks – economic, industrial and social – of the previous dispensation. The passage from the old system based of four pillars – the autocrats, the plutocrats, the bureaucrats and the technocrats to a system founded on completely new pillars – rule of law, with its solid institutional framework and good governance, but also prosperity and more equitable distribution of the benefits of development, security for the state, but also for the individual and so on, can take up to a generation if not longer.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Philip Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Keeping, as much as possible, out of the “post-truth” & “alternative facts” mental intoxication, accepting that the ultimate judge and arbiter of the process is the people itself, and, projecting the people into the perspective – firmly having as agent and beneficiary of the process the youth of the country, whatever its position in society, at a given period, as a “youth bulge” or more diffused into the national tapestry. And, that because, when the labor market, and society in general, remains unfavorable to the need of the younger generation, what will the young men and women do, when they are not making a Revolution – of course they try to emigrate, legally, as in the case of the Romanian youth benefiting from one of the four EU freedoms, legally also, in the case of young Egyptians allowed to go, for instance, to Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, or illegally, as is the case of young people from Syria, or Iraq, or Yemen, and even Egypt.

The electoral process cannot be equated with, especially when it takes place just once, with full democratization. Worse, it could be hijacked by anti-rule of law forces, be they the old or new power-hungry ones, or those of a religious nature. Also, as the current developments continually show, a democratic society, especially when it is an emerging one, is not necessarily corruption free, nor is it necessarily a tolerant one, without power or entrenched interests imposed “red lines”. Of course, the “new” dispensation will have “red lines” including those covering freedom of expression and relations and respect for “the other”, but they will be consciously “self-imposed”, at the societal and personal level.

The zero-sum game which has been until now the mode of operation for interaction with external forces, mainly great powers, could be overcome based on sustainable shared values and common interests, including the institutional framework of economic and security cooperation, bilaterally and regionally.

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⁸⁷ NOTE: All these books and magazines are from the personal library of the paper's author; the Romanian readers interested to borrow one or another please contact gheorghe.dumitru@yahoo.com.

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