Why Social and Political Reform in the Middle East is Unlikely

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Part I - The Concept of Reform

The primary topic of next year's MED is “social, political, and economic reforms.” In order to get a clearer idea of just what is possible in this regard I would like to take a closer look at the concept of reform.

Reform is a modification, and not a wholesale replacement, of the status quo. The latter is not reform but rather is revolution. Therefore, to achieve reform requires a process that is acceptable to most of the concerned parties - a mutually approved process that adjusts the social and political status quo to a changing environment.

Again, this requires cooperation and that is a major roadblock for reform in the Middle East (and elsewhere). There are a large number of stakeholders and the major ones have traditionally resisted compromise either for religious or other ideological reasons or because, having a monopoly of force (we are talking about the military here), they do not feel any need to compromise.

Under these circumstances less powerful groupings seeking to protect their own interests, look to make alliances with the more powerful ones - rather than, say, construct a united front among themselves. And this only confirms the patron-oriented status quo and therefore leads us away from any process of progressive reform. In terms of such alliances it is the military that draws the most solicitors - particularly from (1) religious minorities and (2) Westernized classes. One can see this most recently in the alliances made by the Christians in Syria and Westernized groups in Egypt. Each of these groups feels, rightly or wrongly, threatened by traditionalist Muslim populations (often representing a majority of the population).

Thus, in many places within the Middle East we have division between Muslim traditionalists on the one hand and a secularized military, allied with religious minorities and/or Westernized minority elements, on the other.

On both sides, there is an assumption that power sharing is not desirable, or perhaps even possible. This assumption tends to rationalize the maintenance of various forms of dictatorship. For instance, groups allied to the military elites, including Westernized minorities, seem quite willing to sacrifice any chance for greater democracy, and religious tolerance, for a dictator's protection.
Under such circumstances reform is highly unlikely, although, sooner or later, revolution is probable.

Part II

It must be said that *lasting positive reform* in the Middle East, however it might come, must be compatible with the lifestyle of the vast majority of the region's population.

That means that somehow religious minorities and Westernized classes must find a way of accommodating themselves to traditionalist Islam. And, the Muslim majority must insure, in some convincing manner, the security and equality of these minority groups.

Part III

Of course, positive change is not the only kind of change. Muslim majorities, having obtained power, might follow the model of Israel or Myanmar (Burma) - that is the model of relegating others to second class citizenship or simply ethnically cleansing them. But this would hardly count as positive reform.

At this stage, it is unlikely that the Middle East can look forward to significant reform in the near future. Indeed, it would seem that many of the world's nations, and not just those in the Middle East, are retreating into racist tinted nationalism - not a good sign.

Progressive reform, much to be wished for, seems in abeyance - reserved now for the distant long-term.