

Whither the Middle East?

A curious science is developing in various think-tanks around the world which its practitioners call 'futurology'.

Perhaps believing I might belong to this group I have been asked in this presentation to sketch out before you where the Middle East is likely to be headed. I am not in fact equipped to do so. In fact, I am not sure many people are so equipped. Given the various researches being undertaken around the world on psychological behavior, decision-making, and neurology, perhaps the day will indeed come when we shall all know what to expect before it

happens. Until now, however, this research is in its early stages, and one is justified in thinking that the project is more akin to the dubious pursuit of astrology than to a real hard science.

There are, however, two general statements I would like to make on the nature of historical development. The first is a hypothesis. It is one that comes in various forms, and has many critics. I will draw on a formulation of it by the German philosopher, Kant, and it more or less says that

The history of the human race, viewed as a whole, may be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about a political constitution, internally, and for this purpose, also externally perfect, as the only state in which

all the capacities implanted by her in mankind can be fully developed.

This hypothesis clearly separates out conscious human planning and actions from an underlying historical pattern. The sweeping arc of history must somehow be the shaped by human planning and action, but this relationship is not one of correspondence. Indeed, it cannot be, because, as he tells us,

Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be carved.

One is tempted here to think that what is meant is that history somehow works out for the better by

somehow rearranging human plans and actions rather than by being an imprinted reflection of them.

So much for the hypothesis. One might view it as an article of faith. Its disbelievers and critics come in various forms. Among them we may find the pessimists who despair of anything that can be done to make a better world. Also the futurologists who seek to discover how we behave in order to control this behavior, ostensibly for somehow helping us make a better world.

Let me now broach the second general statement I wish to make. This is more in the form of a

statement of fact. It can thus be verified or falsified. Essentially, its claim is that in all but some cases – cases, significantly, commensurate with the Kantian hypothesis, and explained by actual delivery of the general good—human planning and actions fail to produce outcomes that correspond with expectations. Let me here expand on what I mean by this claim:

Not many outcomes people expected to happen in the Middle East region did. The invasion of Iraq, and the collapse of the Saddam regime, did not unveil the open and democratic society commentators expected. What was produced instead is a fractured society mired in internecine

bloody conflict. Israel's invasion of Lebanon – meant to destroy Hizbullah and the threat it posed to Israel- instead established it as the major power in this neighboring country. The collapse of solid-seeming authoritarian regimes in some capitals of the Arab world- initially through non-violent popular uprisings, but later through brute force- did not usher in the open and free world many expected. Instead, vestiges of the Old World seem to have reappeared, the structure of constraints on freedoms now being informed by the interests of religious parties instead of by self-serving ruling elites. Even the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, begun at Madrid and signed in Oslo, with hopes to put behind decades of conflict, has

ended in a conundrum. If one were to draw a moral out of all of this, one might do well to conclude that history's time-line, as well as its direction, does not quite resemble that of a controlled project where a planner can easily and more or less definitively determine expected outcomes at each stage of the project's implementation. Indeed history –one might well think- seems to have its own mind.

Of course, the above examples are not all picked from the same basket. Some were spontaneous mass eruptions, automatically sparked by certain

incidents; and some were consciously-planned operations. What I wish to point out that they have in common is not how each was initiated, but how, once in motion, they are viewed: for our minds are so constituted that we expect them to have a more or less determined course, and a determined outcome. However, we often find ourselves puzzled –whether disappointed or gladdened- by the results; for these do not meet our expectations. That's when we feel justified to conclude that history seems to have its own mind. But what are we missing to see behind these events that makes us conclude this? Why do events not work out the way we expect, or wish them to?

The Middle East is not, of course, an exception. Take Europe: Whether we consider those grandiose future designs planned by war generals and councilors consecutively leading to the First or Second Wars; or we consider the spontaneous cascade of popular events leading to the rise and then collapse of the Soviet Union and its dissolution into different nation states; or the global financial plans envisioned at Bretton Woods after the Second World War in order to control financial markets, or afterwards for the creation of the European Union: in all these, and countless other examples, given how events in fact unfolded, it is hard put not to conclude that history oftentimes seems to have its own mind. The financial and

social convulsions that have recently begun to shake the Euro-centered world indicate that what may perhaps have been thought to be the most successful of planned projects since the Second World War, make even the future of this world a matter of speculation. One may, of course point to exceptions. Ataturk, in the aftermath the First World War, seems to have single-handedly been able to change the course of his country. Arguably, whatever convulsions the country today faces are confined to a course that had already been successfully determined by the radical changes he introduced. But all in all, I believe it wouldn't be unreasonable to claim that the actual tangent of historical development oftentimes does not

correspond with our expectation –whether the event seems to have been planned, or it suddenly erupts before our eyes.

If the above is true, can we hypothesize an explanation for it? It is easier to explain the lack of correspondence between expectations of commentators and actual tangents where social eruptions are concerned. After all, it is hardly possible to incorporate all the data, present and past, of an entire people or community, and therefore to make realistic forecasts. Also, where forecasts tend to be short-term, as in expecting Egypt to turn into a liberal open society overnight after the fall-down of the Mubarak regime, they are

most likely to be also short on insight and clarity.

But the case is altogether different when an organized authority is the direct cause of change.

Here one might claim the observer is justified in having certain expectations, if only against the foreknowledge that a studied plan was behind the action whose effects one begins to see unfold.

However, whether in the Middle East, or elsewhere in the world as already observed, expectation and actual tangents here often do not seem to correspond: for example, unless the United States meant Iraq to become what it has become, the painful and bloody gap between what was planned and the actual outcome is too glaring for comfort.

This cannot be casually blamed on bad US

planning. As we saw, this phenomenon is historically far too spread to have one party singled out for blame.

When is it possible, one might ask, to forecast outcomes with some measure of accuracy? I already distinguished between Government actions and social or peoples' uprisings or revolutions.

Where revolutions or social upheavals are concerned, the causes will be typically or normally found in some form of injustice -where, for brevity's sake, I shall describe this as the state wherein the many are being exploited by the few.

Government might embody those few, but we all know the few may also be those financial interests

outside Government, and whom Government feels obliged, for one reason or the other, to serve. Where such a situation prevails, and its negative effects on the many begin to be felt, or to reach a critical point, it is natural to attribute the cause of a popular uprising that follows to that state of injustice. Here, then, Government policy causes an eruption, but an eruption's course, as was already said, would be hard to predetermine. So, whether we are talking about such an event as the intervention of the US and its allies in Iraq, or we are considering the unjust internal policies of a Government towards its people, the net result in both cases is one where we cannot in fact forecast or predict outcomes any more than we can predict

or forecast them when we are considering a spontaneous and unplanned uprising. Indeed, such interventions or policies are likely to create the very conditions of instability created by uprisings and revolutions, and are for that reason, partly at least, impervious to prior planning.

Matters are different, on the other hand –and herein lies the heart of the matter- when a project being planned by a central authority, such as a Government, seeks the general good of its people, rather than the interests of the few, or where Government consciously pursues a path towards justice, and institutes structures in the state to achieve that end. Where this is the case, it is

unlikely that fractures in society leading to instability and chaos would follow. But the condition that must be met here is delivery. Where this condition is met, outcomes and expectations correspond, and the Kantian hypothesis is further confirmed, as indeed it is also confirmed when planning runs contrary to making good on the delivery of justice to the people.

One might point out that the above, if true, would work only in sealed laboratory conditions. Such conditions however do not obtain in most countries of the Middle East, where the grounds are fair game to all kinds of external players. Take Syria for example: whatever is now happening there, an

observer has the right to feel, has nothing to do with the Syrians themselves. The main players there are foreign parties and countries –all pursuing their own different ends. It is impossible under such conditions to envisage anything but indeterminate outcomes that will have little to do either with the plans of the different actors, or the good of the people themselves. But it was equally impossible earlier under the existing regime to determine outcomes, as that regime was pursuing the interests of the few, and grounds were ripe for a social upheaval. Egypt is yet another example of an open field. Here, twitter-activists who earlier were conduits for a social upheaval calling for democracy are now suspiciously clamoring for an

upheaval against a democratically elected Government. One has the right to wonder whether those behind the piper players simply represent a foreign anti-Islamicist interest rather than democracy. But the outcome, again, can only be indeterminate –chaos perhaps being a condition, but the outcome not necessarily as planned or expected. Indeed, looking across the Arab World, one cannot help feeling that the post First World War Sykes-Picot agreement still has its hold, given a few changes in the make-up of the main actors.

The situation is not so different when it comes to the darling-subject of commentators and political analysts, Palestine. It is not at all irrational to

suspect that events here are more shaped by outside actors and agents than by the Palestinians themselves. If indeed so, and if the hypothesis is correct that only plans and actions for the general good of the people would produce expected outcomes, it is only reasonable to conclude that all we can expect here is the unexpected. In other words, plans laid down for futures not in line with the general good of the people will also end up in upheavals and disruptions.

I began with a hypothesis and a factual claim. The first, as I said, can be looked upon as an article of faith. The second, which as a reading of history complements that hypothesis, is that plans and

actions not delivering the general good are bound to end in social disruptions. Applied to the Middle East, what this tells us is that social instability will reign for a long time to come, but that it will eventually yield a political order wherein the capacities of mankind will be fully developed, and the general good is realized. Kant speaks of a perpetual peace as an ultimate end, where the general good has been realized, and happiness is finally established. Applied to the Middle East, this tells us that any plans made from crooked timber will be short-lived and will not have any chance of success. Whether it is plans for countries of the region by foreign powers to serve primarily their interests, or it is plans to make peace between

countries, such as between Israel and the Palestinians that will primarily serve Israeli interests, the net outcome will not correspond with those plans. The only path towards stability and peace, etched out despite such plans, and as an indirect result of them, will be the path towards that end wherein the general good will be delivered, and where justice will prevail.