

The Arab World in a Changing International Order

Pasquale Ferrara
Ahmed Aboul Gheit
Sabah Al Momin
Alberto Quadrio Curzio
and Wolfango Plastino

Introduction

Pasquale Ferrara

The League of Arab States is an organization that brings together 22 nations; countries that differ in terms of identity, culture and tradition; nations with their own history and, sometimes, their own conflicts. These countries have found in the Arab League a forum for discussion that has made it possible to settle the differences between its members and to assert their demands on the international stage.

In times of globalization, constructive cooperation among partners is the indispensable method for effective international governance. These are the means to empower and involve everyone in the search for common solutions to common problems. We recognize the value of this approach to peace and shared responsibility, especially in a fragmented context such as the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA Region).

Unfortunately, as is well known, it is an area crossed by interconnected factors of instability (institutional fragility, terrorism, organized crime, climate change, migration and currently also the impact of the pandemic) and in which regional interests and dynamics have a significant impact on local crisis.

The rivalry among great powers, combined with the existing regional rifts between Iran, Saudi Arabia-led Sunni Arab states, Israel and Turkey, has had a negative effect on the stability of the MENA Region. The region has undergone a radical transformation since the 2011 Arab uprisings. The promises of the Arab Spring have not materialized. Arab states have either been severely weakened or have collapsed; territorial boundaries are fragile amid devastating, far-reaching transnational conflict.

This results in a highly polarized and fragmented regional scenario, where the parameters of “sovereignty” of many countries in the area appear in question. Non-state actors – militias, jihadist groups, tribes, city-states, criminal organizations – have increased their power and relevance, weakening government authorities and narrowing the spaces for cultural and religious pluralism. The recent crises are a further confirmation of the MENA Region as the

epicenter of hotbeds of tension and the theater of confrontation, open or hidden, between global and regional powers.

Libya is again at a crossroads. We are following with great attention the latest political developments that led to the designation of Fathi Bashaga, by the House of Representatives, with the task of forming a new government. We are urging all Libyan actors to achieve shared and inclusive solutions and avoid any military escalation, while preserving the political, institutional and territorial integrity of the country.

We respect the sovereignty of Libyan institutions. At the same time, Italy stands with the Libyan people. We hear and understand their democratic aspirations. It is essential to keep the focus on elections, which should be based on a solid, inclusive and shared legal framework. The withdrawal of all foreign fighting forces and mercenaries is also a priority.

Instability in Libya could have negative spillovers on its neighbors, starting with Tunisia, which is already undergoing a complex political and economic phase.

Tunisian President Kais Saied's roadmap for political reform is a positive step forward, but there are grey areas when it comes to its implementation. The recent presidential decision to dissolve the Supreme Judiciary Council is deeply concerning. Respect for the rule of law and fundamental freedoms are key.

The economic and financial outlook of Tunisia in the short and medium term is also of concern. We are working with our European Union and G7 partners to help Tunisia effectively address the political, economic and social challenges facing the country, which are interconnected.

Ongoing diplomatic tensions between Algeria and Morocco risk further delaying the establishment of forms of cooperation in the Maghreb region. A more lasting and authentic cooperation between the two countries would be a key factor for the development and prosperity of a strategic area for the interests of Italy and Europe, also through the economic benefits it would bring.

With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Italy is committed to breathing new life into the negotiations. From our perspective, only a political solution – based on a viable, just and directly negotiated two-state solution – can bring sustainable peace and security to the region.

We need to recover the spirit and vision of the Oslo Accords, for the creation of two states that coexist in mutual recognition and respect, and the realization of two rights: the right of Israel to exist and live in peace and security, and the right of the Palestinian people to have their own country.

The Gaza crisis has once more demonstrated the unsustainability of the *status quo* and the need to re-internationalize the peace process. In this regard, we stress the importance of the International Quartet, as the only legitimate mechanism sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to mediate in the Middle East peace process. In addition, we believe that the role of the EU should be reenergized and it should invest its full political capital in diplomatic efforts to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. Italy is ready to give its contribution for this to happen.

Against this backdrop, it is important to stress the importance of the agreements signed in 2020 by Israel with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, which represent a significant development in the broader framework of Arab-Israeli relations. Italy welcomed the normalization of relations between Israel and some Arab Countries as a positive step towards peace and stability in the region. However, this cannot replace, nor be detrimental to, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. They should proceed in parallel, taking advantage of possible synergies.

Among the most worrisome scenarios in the area, we cannot avoid mentioning the dramatic situation of Lebanon, which is going through one of the most delicate phases in its history. We are deeply concerned about the serious economic and humanitarian crisis that the country is going through.

Therefore, Italy remains committed, through the Italian Cooperation, to supporting the population and contributing to the security of the country through both our participation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and our bilateral training mission (Missione militare Bilaterale Italiana in Libano, MIBIL).

In addition, we continue to encourage the Lebanese government and political class to adopt all necessary reforms to lift the country out of the crisis and to restore trust, and to swiftly complete the investigation into the Beirut port explosions.

With regard to the Persian Gulf states in particular, some encouraging developments within the internal dynamics of the Persian Gulf have been taking place over the last year. First, the relaunch of cooperation within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) after the Al-Ula Summit in January 2021. Although the overcoming of the Gulf rift is uneven, this is a great step forward, since common challenges in the region – such as violent extremism, terrorism and illicit trafficking – can be efficiently addressed only through cooperation. Moreover, we believe that this positive development will also allow the EU and its Member States to

deepen their cooperation with the GCC countries in every possible domain of interest.

Second, the ongoing revitalization of Tehran's dialogue with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In particular, the Saudi-Iranian talks on the Yemeni crisis could be a useful contribution towards a regional detente. We are also witnessing Iraq's positive mediation in the region – namely between Iran and Saudi Arabia – whose role as a platform for regional dialogue is also witnessed by the Conference hosted in Baghdad in August 2022.

Finally, as far as regional stability is concerned, we cannot but consider the impact of the Iranian nuclear dossier. We welcome the encouraging news from the negotiations on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) held in Vienna in April 2021, since we believe that relaunching the nuclear agreement represents – in the short term – the best guarantee for regional stability and security, even beyond the region.

Italy, given its geographical location and its history, has a holistic and inclusive vision of the region that goes beyond crisis management. We want to look at a Mediterranean where ideally the shore is one and only one, a circular one, and the contribution that stems from its multiple collective identities and civil society is the most authentic and representative one.

We have a basic conviction: the Mediterranean will be the more cohesive and interdependent the more all the countries bordering it are able together to protect and manage areas of cooperation such as green transition, blue economy, scientific and cultural diplomacy, which we call “Mediterranean common goods”.

The “common goods” have been, and still are, a matter of dispute. Nonetheless, in the Italian vision, they embody unique cooperation opportunities, in a win-win logic that can lead to a future of shared stability and prosperity.

Lectio Magistralis

Ahmed Aboul Gheit

We are certainly witnessing a unique and pivotal moment in the history of the international order. This moment had already arrived long before the current crisis in Ukraine, which I consider a symptom of a deeper process. It has been sort of a cliché recently to declare the imminent end of the so-called rules-based order, or the upending of the liberal order that underpinned international affairs and the world economy since the end of World War II. But what was this order to begin with? And how did it come into being?

The current international order is the result of a unique moment where one country, the United States, enjoyed unparalleled power. In 1945, the US accounted for 50% of the global economic output, and more than 75% of world military spending. Such unrivaled status provided the US with an opportunity to form the international system with the aim of avoiding future wars between the great powers.

In my opinion, any international system rests upon two pillars; a certain balance of power between major players, and a sense of acceptance of the global arrangements among the great powers. Henry Kissinger described this sense using the word “legitimacy”.

The fundamental premise of the world order that was created after World War II is the sovereignty of nations and inviolability of borders. In establishing this order, Franklin Delano Roosevelt tried to avoid the mistakes of Versailles by incorporating the defeated along with the victors. Roosevelt was also cognizant of the importance of the balance of power. He set up the order in such a way that gives privileged status to certain powers, which are entitled to keep the system – an arrangement that was reflected in the most influential body in the UN system, that is the Security Council. And in order to bolster the order, an array of institutions was set up to facilitate free trade and economic development. Those were the famous Bretton Woods agencies and organizations.

The order engineered by the US managed to weather a cold war with the Soviet Union that dragged on for more than four

decades. It was so successful that some famous thinkers hastened to declare the end of history after the fall of the Soviet Union, stating that the West had no rivals and its way of life, including its political and economic systems, would eventually prevail, and engulf the globe.

That view proved oversimplistic for a very simple reason. Global orders are based primarily, as I described, on the notion of the balance of power. In the decades that ensued after the end of the Cold War, this balance went through fundamental changes. The most significant development in this regard was the rise of China, which was by any measure a miraculous feat, with hundreds of millions leaving the poverty trap and joining the middle class, and growth rates unprecedented in world history.

China's rise is, in my view, the most important phenomenon in global affairs in the last four decades. For one thing, China has achieved its rise, not by challenging the system, but rather by perfecting its tools. Moreover, it has done so through its unique strategy of mixing capitalism with Chinese characteristics. That is precisely what makes it a real rival to the West. China is not a spoiler bent on undermining the system. Some in the US may accuse China of some foul play, but on the whole, China is part of the international system and plays by its rules. It also presents the world with an alternative system, both political and economic, that at least in some aspects, seems more effective than that of the West.

China has its own ambitions of course. For years, the Chinese leaders heeded Deng Xiaoping's advice: "Hide your strength, and bide your time". But with President Xi assuming power in 2012, it seemed that this strategy has entered a new phase whereby China is clearly aspiring to translate its economic achievement into an elevated status on the world scene. It wishes to be respected and dealt with as a great power equal to the US.

China's rise is a clear challenge to the balance of power. Historically, international systems had a hard time dealing with rising powers. Germany's rise at the beginning of the 20th century is one case in point. Some scholars define this perilous situation as a "Thucydides trap" after the great Greek historian who analyzed the war between Athens and Sparta in the 5th century B.C.

China's rise is by no means the only challenge facing the international order today. Other challenges were created by the conduct and behaviour of the American leadership during the unilateral moment in the post-Cold War era. I mentioned the unique role of the US in establishing the system and keeping it since 1945. Through a wide network of alliances, the US remained the number one security guarantor in many parts of the world, including

in Europe, and in the Middle East. The Soviet Union represented a “perfect enemy” which provided the real glue that held this alliance system together. With the unraveling of the Soviet Union, the whole system, as many expressed at the time, lost its *raison d’être*. The US and the Western alliance started searching for a new mission and a new cause.

For more than 20 years, the US adopted an advance strategy predicated on making the world safer for democracy. It engaged in dangerous military adventures, in Afghanistan and Iraq, aimed primarily at regime change. For decades it worked hard to engineer new political realities in these countries, and elsewhere.

I do believe that this advance strategy was not only ill-advised, but also constituted a deviation from the basic pillars and principles upon which the whole international system was established back in the 1940s. State sovereignty and the territorial integrity of nations were trampled upon, under different pretexts. At the core of this new American strategy was an implied premise that one value system, namely the one adopted by the West, is better and more civilized than all the other systems. Unfortunately, the fall of communism led some thinkers, strategists, and statesmen to believe that a certain way of life is destined to prevail in the world. Moreover, some were convinced that it was their mission and their responsibility to engage in a “crusade” to propagate this system, and enforce it on others if need be.

That was a crucial mistake. Through a series of costly adventures, the US realized, the hard way, that it was relatively easy to undermine a country, or to topple a government, but it was extremely difficult to engineer a new political order or create a new sustainable social reality. Nation building, particularly in weak states, cannot be achieved by foreign interventions. The result was devastating both for the countries that witnessed this kind of political experimentation, such as Iraq, and for the United States itself. Costly interventions had the adverse effect of awaking and reinforcing a longstanding American tradition in foreign policy which believes that isolationism is the best way to deal with the world. Such a trend was most apparent during the Trump era, and had a profound impact on relations between America and many countries around the world, including its closest allies in NATO.

Paradoxically, America’s so-called unilateral moment paved the way for a new phase of semi-isolationism, whereby the US has been increasingly unwilling to engage in keeping the World order it helped forging.

This situation, coupled with the significant changes in the global balance of power, resulted in a new international reality

marked by great power competition. Both China and Russia harbor ambitions to redress historical injustices inflicted on them. In their view, the current world order does not reflect their weight or match their aspirations. World orders, as I explained, depend on a sense of acceptance. Once this sense is lacking, disorder creeps in and eats away at the rules and principles that underpin the system.

Great power competition is bad news for the world, especially if the relevant powers do not recognize the same rules of the game. It is also bad news for another reason. The conflict between great powers makes it extremely difficult to provide solutions for an array of global problems and challenges that call for a global response. Pressing issues, such as climate change, cyber security, pandemics, and non-proliferation, cannot be adequately addressed in an international environment marked by competition and characterized by mistrust.

All those daunting challenges were not present at the inception of the world order in the 1940s. They are new challenges that emerged as a result of globalization and the increasingly sprawling global network. No single nation, no matter how powerful it is, has the capacity or the will to address those issues by itself, and without the cooperation of other major players. Anyone who followed the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26) in November 2021 has a sense of how difficult it is to reach a consensus on those types of issues.

Great power competition will also have significant impact on regional orders around the world. When great powers are engaged in a struggle for dominance, some ambitious middle powers work hard to gain ground and build spheres of influence for themselves. At times of global instability, those aspiring regional players have more strategic self-determination, so to speak. This dynamic can easily be detected in Middle East.

Our region suffered the most international interventions in the last two decades. Modern Arab states have their failings and weaknesses, no doubt about it. Nevertheless, it has become abundantly clear that foreign interventions, in different shapes and forms, exacerbated Arab problems by putting immense pressures on already weak state structures. Weak states were turned into failed states, as is the case in Syria, Libya and Yemen. We should not also forget how the Iraqi state was devastated and undermined by an American invasion in 2003.

The result was the nightmare scenarios that we all witnessed in the last decade; social fabrics unraveling, state structures undermined, and millions of refugees fleeing conflict zones. Europe itself was not far from the repercussions of the upheaval as hundreds

of thousands of refugees crossed its borders with far-reaching political consequences relating to the migration issue in European politics, resulting in the rise of far-right parties and movements.

Moreover, the regional balance of power was undermined. Non-Arab players, namely Iran and Turkey, exploited the ensuing chaos to interfere in the affairs of Arab states and create proxies, in the case of Iran, or support certain Islamist forces in the case of Turkey. Another neighboring country, Ethiopia, exploited the situation in its own way, deciding unilaterally to build a huge dam on the Blue Nile, without any regard for the interests of other riparian countries, namely Egypt and Sudan, who depend totally on the Nile for their livelihoods.

Political and security vacuums invite interventions. It is an iron law of international affairs. It was not only states that intervened, but non-state actors, armed groups, and terrorist organizations were all eager to fill the void.

Amid the chaos, fundamental historic questions, like the Palestinian question, were sidelined or put on the back burner, with dire consequences for peace and stability in the region. I do believe that without a final settlement to the Palestinian question, one that results in ending occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, peace and security in the Middle East will continue to be elusive and unsustainable.

Where do we go from here?

The international order and the regional one are interconnected. An international order marked by great power competition, less governed by rules, is not in the interest of regional orders around the world. As a result of the current crisis in Ukraine, some people are beginning to realize how important it is to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations, as a founding principle of the international order. We need to stress the fact that disrespecting these guiding principles has led to the weakening of the system in the previous two decades.

In a multipolar world, like the one that is emerging in recent years, no value system or political order has moral superiority over others. No country has the duty, or the right, to intervene in other countries and engineer political orders to its liking. No country, even a great power, has the capacity to enforce its will on other powers, or bring about regime change. This is a fundamental fact of our world today. It is also a lesson we draw from recent history. Great powers need to find a way to live together, because their cooperation is a must to face new challenges. Our experience with the Covid-19 pandemic should enlighten our way forward. A divided world, marked by mistrust and conflict, will fail to mobilize

the necessary capacity and the needed resilience to face the next pandemic, or the looming climate crises.

The same principle should govern regional orders, including the one in the Middle East. Regional ambitions for hegemony are a recipe for disaster. Nation states should be bolstered, rather than undermined by infiltrating militias that fan the flames of sectarian strife. The Arab nation state, with all its woes and problems, is the fundamental political unit of the regional order in the Middle East. The weakening of states was, in my view, a grave sin that opened the gates of hell in our region.

I do not absolve some former leaders, or some political élites of their responsibility. Terrible mistakes were committed in the past, and some continue to be committed in the present. The way forward, however, should not be a repeat of the mistakes of the past. Good governance and the rule of law are two necessary components of any stable state. A number of Arab countries have already embarked on this path, with varying degrees of success. Those countries are trying to build a stable regional order amid immense challenges, against all odds, and in the face of aggressive and expansionist policies by some of our neighbors. Those countries represent, in my view, the hope in a better and more prosperous Middle East in the future. Their efforts to achieve economic development and provide opportunities for their youth should be supported and bolstered by the outside world.

I may have portrayed a somewhat bleak picture. I am a realist by nature, but I am also an optimist. I also believe in diplomacy as an embodiment of human wisdom and rationality. Conflicts and wars are, in the final analysis, a failure of diplomacy and dialogue. Keeping international stability and creating a better future is a choice within our hands. Diplomacy does not recognize fatalism or historical determinism. I believe that the majority of people all over the world have similar aspirations and ambitions. They simply want their kids to lead better lives than they did, and to live in a safer world that provides them with enough opportunity to flourish and prosper. I hope the leaders, and those who take the consequential decisions in the coming weeks and months, in the major capitals around the world, will be up to their peoples' aspirations.

Discussion *

Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Sabah Al Momin,
Alberto Quadrio Curzio and Wolfango Plastino

Wolfango Plastino: You mentioned great power competition as the main dynamic that characterizes the international order in the current moment. Do you see any lessons that could be learned from the Cold War in this regard? And what are the best strategies for small and middle powers to deal with a world marked by great power competition?

Ahmed Aboul Gheit: I think the leaders of the different great powers, as well as the leaders of other countries, have to be very cool-headed, because the times are grave. There were also grave times during the Cold War: the Cuba crisis in 1962, the Korean War in 1950-53. But the powers then, and the leaders then, managed to control their senses and to maneuver and to be rational and to think hard about what the consequences of their actions would be. So today we have to be careful, and think hard about the consequences of whatever decisions we take. That is one point.

As for the medium and small powers, they will face very stressful times. During the Cold War, they took positions of non-alignment and neutrality. I wonder if the possibility of the revival of a non-alignment movement is available. If not, small powers and medium powers should unite in order to work with the great powers to bring them together, to moderate among them, to negotiate – to help them to bridge whatever gaps and conflicts there are among them.

Sabah Al Momin: Now, the first lesson that we learn from the Cold War is resorting to sitting and talking – negotiations – to solve conflicts. That is not an easy task. Negotiating between two

* The text below is the full transcript of the roundtable that followed the *Lectio Magistralis* by H.E. Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States.

powers, which come with the same beliefs but pull in different directions – that takes a long time. To make it work, countries have to develop tolerance and acceptance of ideologies and knowledge of ideologies, to know how to talk and how to approach the other side.

The other lesson concerns the internal capacity-building of countries, and not only from a military standpoint. That was one way that powers followed: building arms and military, to express power relations. That situation may reflect power, but it also gives confidence to the people of that country. That confidence is not merely straightforward, because it also causes stress for the people, and confusion; and so, each approach has its pros and cons.

Now, the other part of this question is what strategies small and medium-sized countries should follow. First of all, they need to promote human rights and the dignity of their people and create healthy societies. They have to learn how to understand others, other policies, other ideologies, other systems, so that they can be open and decide on policies to follow and how to negotiate. They need to build solidarity and allies, and that doesn't mean internationally; it's within. Unification *within* the country, of its *own* people, is the starting point, and having recourse to allies to solve other issues.

Also, they need to build policies to produce a strong economic situation and, coming from the science side, we always believe that science plays a big role in establishing strong economies, and gives these countries stability and a future.

Alberto Quadrio Curzio: One of the most valuable lessons of the Cold War is the spirit of the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe signed in 1975. It gave birth to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and was founded upon the so-called Decalogue:

- Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty
- Non-recourse to the threat or use of force
- Inviolability of borders
- Territorial integrity of states
- Peaceful resolution of disputes
- Non-intervention in internal affairs
- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
- Equal rights and self-determination of peoples
- Cooperation among states
- Compliance in good faith with obligations under international law.

These are universal principles that should be applied worldwide. In the contemporary world, small and middle-sized powers have a little trouble with regard to how to conduct their international relations in a context of great power competition. They can adopt a mixed policing strategy built on a case-by-case approach and through regional cooperation initiatives like Multilateral Development Banks or multilateral fora.

Wolfgang Plastino: You portrayed a gloomy picture of the Middle East since the so-called Arab Spring in 2011. Do you not see any light at the end of the tunnel? In other words, how can the Middle East overcome its current bleak reality, marked by conflict and instability, and move on to a more prosperous future?

Ahmed Aboul Gheit: We need people, foreign powers, not to interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries. We have to give the Arab nation-states the possibility to be revived, to create an internal balance, because interventions lead to lots of competition, and as foreign powers compete, they employ proxies, they employ militias, and the result stands before our eyes in different Arab countries – currently, today, now, as I speak. So, the important thing is to stop interfering. Allow the Arab nation-states to bloom, to rebuild themselves, to apply policies, to apply the rule of law, to apply economic revival, to relaunch themselves. That will not be taking place unless peace and stability prevail all over the region. The situation is particularly sad in Syria: you see different powers interfering all the time, and foreign forces are on Syrian soil all the time, as well as in Libya, as well as in Iraq, and you see foreign influence in different places. So, the recipe is: stop interfering.

Sabah Al Momin: The Arab Spring started with a protest against economic stagnation, poverty, corruption in systems, and this is not a unique thing in the Arab world only. Many countries go through such things.

How to move to a better future? First, we realize that such a prize has been given to us by young people, who acquired knowledge mainly from social media, and created awareness internally and internationally. So, if you look into this statement, it comes down to young people, knowledge, social media, awareness. Science and technology were used for the uprising, for correcting systems. This brought the attention of governments to notice young people and their knowledge and their power, and to notice

the economic status that they are in and to try to make policies to improve and strengthen their economies. It became the starting point for a meeting between governments and people, to start talking to each other. It's no longer one person's or a few people's decision; it's a collective effort. Governments now are aware of the value of science-based and evidence-based policies. They are aware of how to go about things through more collaborations and how to build and diversify economies.

Alberto Quadrio Curzio: The Middle East has the rare opportunity to become the 'connection-hub' between the West (Europe) and the East. The enforcement of the rule of law will also play a positive effect in enhancing regional cooperation and in easing the process of establishing new common regional institutions. In this context, I see cooperation and regional integration possible if managed through existing regional multilateral institutions and new ones. A viable option could be the creation of an Arab Multilateral Development Bank (MDB), which could be sustained as well by the National Sovereign Funds of the wealthiest Arab states. MDBs usually pave the way for strong regional cooperation leading to stability and prosperity. Moreover, by interacting with other regional and non-regional MDBs, they contribute to forming a friendly and multicultural environment and strengthening cooperative relations across regions.

Wolfgang Plastino: *Is the Arab League, as a long-standing regional organization, still relevant today given the dramatic transformation in the Arab world and the wider region? What are the main challenges facing it?*

Ahmed Aboul Gheit: The Arab League was established in February-March 1945, six months before the United Nations. And yes, we maintain the best of relations with the United Nations, and we meet in the Security Council once every two years, as heads of the two organizations. The Arab League is composed of twenty-two states. One of them is frozen; its membership is frozen. The League was established among seven states – there were originally only seven regional participants. The idea of the League was to coordinate the actions of these countries, to coordinate their positions – not their policies, but their positions. Every position needed to be coordinated, then the Arab League and the Arab League Secretariat would facilitate the convening of meetings.

But over the years the Arab League system evolved in a manner that *almost identically* resembled that of the United Nations, whereby we see an ECOSOC, or an Economic and Social Council; then there are ministerial gatherings in every domain. There are foreign minister meetings; there are cultural minister meetings; there are health minister meetings. There are transportation minister meetings. There are ministers of economy, ministers of trade, ministers of agriculture. Then, added to that, a number of organizations were established in all domains to study issues, to suggest policies, and to offer reports to member states. Actually, the system is so broad that even the participants within the system cannot fully identify how it coordinates. And then everybody meets twice a year, in a sort of supreme coordinating body, to coordinate all policies and to suggest courses of action to member states.

The Arab League is not only political; the Arab League is political, it's economic, it's social, it's about security; it has ministers of the interior, ministers of justice. And don't forget, as regards this region – which covers the area between Morocco, to the West overlooking the Atlantic, and Oman in the East overlooking the Indian Ocean – don't forget that it takes you at least eleven to thirteen hours to fly over that area, which has almost 400 million people as its population. They all speak Arabic; *all of them* speak Arabic. So, the culture is there, and the unity of thought is there. And they are mostly Muslims, so the Book and Islam dominates everywhere in that region. The Arab League is not simply pertinent; if it was not there, I would have invented an Arab League to coordinate these actions – a huge organization with a huge population with a huge area with a culture that is equal to any other culture in the world.

Sabah Al Momin: I'm not a politician, and I'm talking from the point of view of a scientist, on how science can play a role in improving the status of regions or countries. We believe that science can guide politicians in the right way. It makes politicians believe, and when they talk, they talk about reality, about evidence. They speak with strength. We can see that the world is changing very fast, and the region is witnessing a fast-paced transformation in different countries from different angles. The Arab League can notice such fast-paced transformation and try to cope with it.

If that path is adopted, the talks and the minds involved in it will be on a different wavelength – on how to strengthen the region, how to strengthen the less fortunate countries in that region, how to make them much more productive, how to educate

societies, which is a point of strength. Education, knowledge, science research – once we establish this, we are establishing a strong base. Young people especially can stabilize their countries and make them more productive countries, self-sufficient countries, rather than depending on help and donations. Education, knowledge, technology – these issues made the superpowers. You put the power in your country internally. And now the UN has defined the sustainable goals. So, organizations like the Arab League have a target: the goals. It is necessary to organize the region to solve and follow the established goals collectively, rather than each country doing its own bit. This is the scientific point of view.

Alberto Quadrio Curzio: Perhaps some institutional engineering is needed, in order to adapt the existing organization to the contemporary scenario. Again, I stress the economic points. Effective regional integration occurs when steps are taken towards the creation of a common market, the promotion of national economic reforms to support economic growth, the support to human development through appropriate policies of Research and Development and Innovation (R&D&I) investments, and the carrying out of international relations through a common voice expressed within the organization. I believe that the League should create its own MDB, through which it might pursue the realization of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and to improve the Human Development Index. Moreover, an Arab MDB could have the unique opportunity to interact with the existing African Development Bank, which could have a great impact on the human and economic development of the Middle-East and the African Continent as well.

Wolfgang Plastino: *How do you see the future of relations between the Arab World and the main Islamic regional players, Iran and Turkey?*

Ahmed Aboul Gheit: Iran and Turkey are neighbors with which the Arab world shares a long and rich history going centuries back. The future with those regional players could be characterized by stability and potential cooperation only if they abandon their hegemonic ambitions over Arab countries. Thus, they have to refrain from interfering in their internal affairs and rather seek to engage in a sustainable relationship with their Arab neighbors based on mutual respect.

Sabah Al Momin: The rapid transformation of the region, policies, and diplomacies are taking new paths of technological intelligence, integration, and science-based economies.

Both countries are highly advanced in science and technology, but the lack of knowledge about their scientific capabilities and potentials is limited. However, collaboration in science is the new way of integration through joint research projects. Institutions of common scientific interests are being established such as Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME), King Abdulla University of Science and Technology (KAUST) which aims to be a leader in S&T and open to students worldwide, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Such organizations play an important role in building scientific capacities through exchange and collaborations beyond political situations.

Alberto Quadrio Curzio: I would like to start with a premise. During my long academic and scientific career, I met many scholars and intellectual personalities from these important countries. What I found was that, on the ground of science and cultural issues, there was not much remarkable difference among us.

Let me mention some examples: the UN system including Sustainable Developments Goals, archeology and ancient history, and multilateral development banks. These are not means of avoiding political problems but ways of finding a common cultural ground of trust on which institutional solutions can be built.

Undoubtedly, regional political relations in the Middle East might have deteriorated in recent years. A functional regional cooperation organization, however, might have the potential to turn conflicting interests towards neutral and, possibly, convergent interests, by accruing a degree of mutual trust in the regional actors.

The process of European integration showed quite well that disruptive potential differences, too, could be mitigated by adopting the most adequate and effective integration policies. Actually, functionalism is the most viable tool to design effective policies, and the Arab League might be the most consistent multilateral forum to help design and implement these policies. Both Iran and Turkey are important regional players, distinguishing themselves for their technological and economic advancements, especially during the last years. The best policies are those which are successful in turning national progresses into international political cooperation, bringing national communities to share their scientific and technical goals towards the construction of a common and peaceful future.

Wolfgang Plastino: *Do you still see the two-state solution as the only realistic and viable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?*

Ahmed Aboul Gheit: I do believe that without a final settlement to the Palestinian question, one which results in ending occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, peace and security in the Middle East will never be achieved. The two-state solution is the only realistic and viable path to resolve this conflict. Otherwise, if there is no progress in that direction, in a few years we will be left with one reality, which is a state governed by an apartheid system where a minority dominates an oppressed Palestinian people.

Sabah Al Momin: One can hope for the conflict to be solved, whichever way is chosen. As a scientist – and as I mentioned in the previous question – rethinking the approach to find solutions should come through more applied workable solutions.

Palestinian youth and students should be given a chance to develop their own strong, science-based economy in order to improve the quality of life. Such an approach will also allow less dependency on Israeli services. I believe the EU is adopting such an approach along with scientific research collaborations between students from both sides. Collaborative research ought to be of mutual interest, such as in the areas of energy and water. Such efforts will reduce tension in conflict situations. However, increased funding is needed for maximum benefits.

Alberto Quadrio Curzio: I would like to start my answer with a specific personal memory. When I was dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences of the Università Cattolica, I decided to deliver an Honorary Degree to Shimon Peres. In my laudation I said:

“The Faculty of Political Science has decided to award him the Laurea Honoris Causa considering that, in his high political and governmental functions in the State of Israel, Shimon Peres has promoted the peace process with the Palestinian people in an area of crucial importance in international relations, contributing through negotiations to the encounter between civilizations and cultures and to the historical process of cooperation between the peoples of the Middle East”.

Some years before, in that faculty, I strongly supported the creation of the chair of “History and Institutions of the Muslim World” held by Professor Valeria Fiorani Piacentini, who created also the CRiSSMA, Center of Research on the Southern System and the Wider Mediterranean.

She and her team of scholars went many times to the Middle East, Israel and Islamic countries on cultural missions, and by doing so, contributed to understanding along cultural and political lines.

It is also worth mentioning the Peres Center for Peace & Innovation, whose mission is to empower diverse people in Israel and the region to work together to address complex societal challenges and forge innovative new paths for peace. Through its programmes of Regional Business, Entrepreneurship and Innovation, the Center is playing a key role in developing the original concept of the ‘Start-up Nation’ into the new one of the ‘Start-up region’. The rationale of the Center’s activity is to build on the intersecting ground of innovation and peace, to promote regional progress, prosperity and peace.

In the words of Shimon Peres himself: “Innovation is not a mission to be completed, but a never-ending pursuit. It is not enough to be up to-day, we have to be up to-morrow”.

Other multilateral institutions are playing an intense role in the Israeli-Palestinian context, like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Bank Group and other national solidarity funds, which carry out many development assistance programmes, aimed primarily at developing the so-called human capital that is needed to start a consistent evolution. All these multilateral initiatives are the real key to stabilizing the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian relations and to creating a solid ground for peace.

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