The Middle East After September 11

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Introduction:

- **The Middle East lies at the heart of the world. With its vast energy resources, strategic importance to world powers and highly volatile politics it has occupied for decades a unique**

place in international relations. At present, the countries of the Middle East, with the assistance of the international community, are striving to achieve reasonable levels of stability and economic development. They are trying to find the most appropriate way to settle the single longest and most intractable conflict in modern history: the Arab Israeli conflict.

- **The complexity of the situation in the Middle East is difficult to address in a short paper. Yet, some basic facts will have to be explained in order to give a balanced sense of current events in this important region of the world.**

- **The attacks of September 11, though unprecedented in their scale and ferocity, were not the beginning of terrorism nor will they be the end of it. The Middle East, like many other regions of the world, has lived and struggled against terrorism for years before 9/11. But the perceived origin of those attacks and their identified perpetrators focused world attention on the political and socio-economic situation in the Middle East.**

- **In this paper, we will address the perceived effects of the September 11th attacks, on the Middle East. In order to do that, we will take a look at the region before that date, and then move to examine what consequences the events of that day had on various issues in the Middle East. We will conclude with some remarks and an outlook for the future.**

I- The Middle East before:

The regional context

Background

For over five decades, the Middle East was synonymous with the Arab Israeli conflict. Since the UN resolution 181 of 1947 divided Palestine under the British mandate into two states: one Jewish and one Arab, each on 50% of the land, this region and the world has known five decades of intense conflict with more than five major wars, two colossal uprisings and countless victims. From the outset, a grave feeling of injustice befell the Arab population in Palestine and the rest of the Arab World. They felt that the land allocated by the UN to the Jewish population of Palestine – which roughly constitued 22% of the total then – was far greater land than it really might have been entitled to. The fact that Israel ended up gaining 28% more land after the first war with the Arabs in 1948 intensified those feelings. The plight of the Palestinian refugees driven away from their homeland during the hostilities compounded those feelings much further. Sentiments of historic injustice remain to this day and are critical in understanding some of the raw anger and frustration of many Arabs and Palestinians. After all, the Question of Palestine lies at the heart of the Arab Israeli conflict.

Thirty years later in 1977, Egypt's President broke the cycle of death and destruction with a historic visit to Israel and an offer of peaceful co-existence with the State that was – so far – refused by its neighbors. This pioneer step will be forever marked in history as the most important turn in the history of this conflict. Consequently, Egypt and Israel reached in 1979 a peace agreement whereby ALL Egyptian territories occupied by Israel in 1967 would be returned to Egypt's sovereignty in exchange of the establishment of peaceful relations between the two countries. They both reached mutual security arrangements to enhance the state of peace between them. This agreement was founded on the notions set out in UNSCR 242. It was dubbed later by the US as the formula – or the principle - of "Land for Peace".

Much to the frustration of Egypt, the following decade did not witness any additional steps toward peace, rather the contrary. Between Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the eruption of the first Intifada in 1987, the region was clearly set on a course of continued conflict. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 was a major setback in Arab as well as regional politics. It would have repercussions that continue to this day.

It was not until the aftermath of the Gulf War, in October 1991, that the United States has succeeded in bringing Arabs and Israelis together in Madrid in the first real attempt to bring this conflict to an end. The Madrid Conference was convened on the same basis upon which a just and lasting peace was established between Egypt and Israel: Israel must cede the land it has occupied by force since the 5th of June 1967 in exchange for peaceful relations and mutual security arrangements with its Arab

neighbors. A multilateral track of negotiations on eventual regional cooperation among the countries of the region, including Israel, was also initiated.

Unfortunately, negotiations under the Madrid auspices did not yield much result on any track. It was not until 1993 that a breakthrough happened on the Palestinian track. In September of that year the Oslo agreement was signed in the White House. Hopes were high for the achievement of peace in the region at last. Ensuing events demonstrated that hopes were not enough to achieve peace. A right wing Israeli Government came to power in 1996 and re-opened signed agreements. By the time it left office in 1999, the level of confidence between Israel and its Arab neighbors was at a low point. The Palestinians were especially hurt by the way that Government dealt with them.

Hopes again were high when a new coalition acceded to power in Israel. Those hopes were quickly tested by another Israeli request to re-open signed agreements. In a positive first step, Israel withdrew its forces from Lebanon. But while it pursued political dialogue on both Palestinian and Syrian tracks, it allowed the greatest surge in settlement activity in the Occupied Territories. Unfortunately, a US-Syrian summit in Geneva proved that peace between Syria and Israel was tougher to reach than many had initially predicted; this track has been stalling since then. The Camp David Summit in July/August 2000 attempted to solve the Israeli Palestinian conflict once and for all, but failed. It released a reservoir of feelings of anger and frustration on the Palestinian side because of what they perceived as an Israeli insistence to compromise the "remaining" 22% of historic Palestine which they believe they are fully entitled to, as well as the issue of sovereignty over the holy part in Jerusalem.

The year before September 11

The most dominant regional political factor in the Middle East in the months before the attacks took place was the Palestinian s*econd intifada*. The second intifada, ignited by a visit of the then Israeli opposition leader A. Sharon to the site of Alharam Alsharif, illustrated the amount of anger and frustration of ordinary Palestinians vis-a-vis the ongoing political efforts. Attempts were made to repress the intifada and failed. Many Palestinians considered it to be their final battle for independence. It received an overwhelming Arab support; and World opinion was also supportive in the beginning. It was clear that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands went on for too long and imposed too much suffering on a people yearning for freedom and independence.

The repressive policies of the Israeli Government contributed only in deepening the feelings of injustice and revenge-seeking. The pre-dominantly right wing government openly declared that it sought to demolish the will of the Palestinians by military force. The Palestinian reactions were of a similar nature. Reason was replaced by revenge and the more time was passing the more it was clear that the Israeli Government was not interested in pursuing a political dialogue. Frustration was at its peak. The *intifada* resorted to different ways of resisting the occupation among which suicide bombings inside Israel.These bombings were condemned by World opinion as well as many in the Arab countries beside the governments. Between ardent defenders and firm critics, they created a controversy that remains until today. Meanwhile, the US administration - in office since January 2001 - opted for inaction. Its low level of engagement, its media statements were perceived by all Arabs as being uneven, if not flagrantly biased against the Palestinians. The Arab opinion was angry.

Away from the situation in Palestine, Iraq and the UN were at a stalemate concerning the return of inspectors to Iraq. While the stalemate continued, the Iraqi government was actively engaged in building economic and political bridges with other countries in the region. A process of re-integrating Iraq in the regional community of nations was slowly underway. Meanwhile, and much to the objection of many Arabs including in the Gulf States, the US military presence in the Gulf continued. Some of it was directed toward the enforcement of no-fly zones on Iraqi airspace.

The economic situation in the region before September 11 was gloomy. Globalization had a major effect on many economies in the region. Some countries, integrated in the global economy, were able to benefit from it more than others. Yet there was a heavy toll on regional stability caused by the events in Palestine. The economies in the region were all struggling in order to achieve better levels of development. However, constraints on the economies of the region were heavy, and each country, for its own reasons, was perceived to be in difficulty.

Terrorism and extremism:

For a number of years, several countries in the Middle East had to face a rising number of Islamist militant groups, which sought to achieve political goals through violent means. Egypt was a notable example of this dangerous phenomenon. Other countries faced the same phenomenon at different levels. Algeria was a case by itself.

Much has been said about the political and socio-economic motives behind religious extremism as well as the violence it preaches. The focus of world attention especially after 9/11 was directed toward the process of modernity in the Middle East

countries and whether it failed to respond to people's needs. We will not address this issue here. However, it can be safely said that the conventional wisdom in the region has always been that, in addition to domestic reasons specific to each situation, there is a clear link between the regional situation - especially the accumulated Arab and Muslim popular frustration over the question of Palestine - and the spread of militant violent acts attributed to religious extremism. Later events would prove that terrorism could also claim linkages with other regional issues, such as the US military presence in the Gulf, as has been proclaimed by the Qaeda organization.

Combating terrorism has never been an easy task. Ever since terrorists assassinated President Sadat in 1981, and especially throughout the 1990s, Egypt had to struggle against increasing terrorism. The Government acted on several tracks. Beside its unrelenting security efforts, it was largely successful – after a long struggle - in winning the battle for the minds and hearts of the public opinion. This success deprived those groups of additional recruits and of much needed sympathy among the population. They were to announce a renunciation of violence later in 2002.

Nevertheless, extremism remained in the region and terrorism continued. It can not be overstated how the actions of the Israeli military machine in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, televised to millions of frustrated Arabs throughout the region and beyond, only help fomenting strong anti-Israeli as well as anti-American popular feelings.

II- The Immediate Aftermath:

The scale of the September 11 events was a shock to everybody. It was an unprecedented act of deliberate murder of innocent civilians. The world was disgusted and stood in solidarity with the victims. The world rallied behind the United States as its President was declaring his intention to make fighting terrorism a first priority for his term in office.

There was ample anticipation in the world as to the scope the US administration will choose for its fight. To the relief of many, the US president clearly stated, in his speech before the US Congress, that he will focus his fight on terrorism with "global reach". This was taken to mean the only organization in the world that is working on a "global" stage and scale: Al Qaeda. It immediately excluded all other "local" or "regional" organizations (Hizbollah – Hamas – Islamic Jihad etc..) that have been accused by quarters in the West of being terrorist organizations, even if

they were perceived by many in the region as being engaged in a legitimate fight for liberation and/or independence.

That statement helped, in great part, opening the door for many countries, especially in the Middle East, to join the American efforts in combating worldwide terrorism. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Morocco and other countries joined in the fight. Intelligence information was shared, financial crackdowns occurred and many suspects were arrested. As announced, several would-be attacks were foiled due to this cooperation.

The popular sentiments in the Arab World, during the immediate aftermath, were not far from the cooperative spirit shown by the Arab Governments. It is true that scores of Arabs did not know who, nor what, to believe at first and they refused to accept the possibility that fellow Arabs and Muslims were perpetrators of such an atrocity. With the history of plotting in a region like the Middle East, people tend to question the authenticity of any evidence presented to them in such circumstances. They questioned, and some still, many specifics: from the disappearance of the back boxes of the planes to the identity of the perceived hijackers, from the “speed” in which a case was presented to the world hours after the attacks to a much talked-about role of Israeli persons photographing the attacks in New York without sharing their source of information with anyone. Some were simply dismissive of the idea that fellow Arabs and Muslims have the capacity to plan and execute such meticulous acts (albeit heinous acts of horror). These were “cave people”, they say, and they can not be solely responsible for such “sophisticated” planning and execution, thereby hinting that other “big minds” must be behind the scenes. Some saw the attacks as being "divine" revenge for the suffering of Arab brethren in Palestine and Iraq, but these were clearly a minority. However, it is fair to say that the overwhelming feelings in the Arab Street, political commentariat and the Media were of dismay, shame and anticipation of a huge fight to come. These feelings ran from Morocco to Bahrain, and with an understandable exception of Iraq, Arab citizens throughout were sharing one or more of these feelings.

On the other hand, Israel, led by a Government seeking to undermine the peace process, saw in these events a “once-every-century” opportunity to achieve a strategic goal. It worked fervently within the United States to capitalize on those events. Its logic was simple: the US had to recognize that the fight of both the US and Israel against terrorism should be a united one, and that there should not be any differentiation between one “kind” of terrorism and another under "false pretexts" such as the claim that one is motivated against a "so-called" occupation. Its supporters in the US were mobilized and it was making its case loud and clear. Within a short period of time, Israel had gained

what it wanted: the organizations fighting against it in Palestine and Lebanon were branded terrorists. This was perceived as a green light for the government to act freely against Palestinian militants. The Israeli Government then intensified its efforts in order to convince the US and the world that the Palestinian Authority itself was a hub of terrorism and that it should be demolished. The world was skeptical about the Israeli claims. But it was only a matter of time before the Israelis proceeded with utmost vigor to achieve their only declared political goal so far: the destruction of the Oslo process and its achievements on the ground.

The situation regarding Iraq remained tense. Some voices within the US were calling to seize the moment and attack Iraq.It was deemed to be inappropriate at the time especially in view of the fact that there were no evidence linking Iraq with the attacks. A wait-and-see attitude was developing and it was not before long that countries in the region found out that striking Iraq was being, slowly but surely, included as the target of a second phase in the "global" war on terrorism.

III - The Middle East after the attacks:

By the beginning of the year 2002, the region was engaged in different ways in the war on terrorism: the Arab countries in cooperating with the US authorities and Israel in convincing the US that it was the vanguard of the American fight and that it needed US support. Striking Iraq and changing the regime there was openly talked about as a serious next step in the war on terror.

The worldview of the Middle East was beginning to change in the most significant way in years. Many in the world, especially in the West, were developing negative opinions about Arabs and Muslims. The Arabs' major cause, the Question of Palestine, suffered a major blow. People throughout the world openly went as far as questioning the place of Islam and its followers in the community of civilized nations. Stereotyping and profiling were common against people of Middle Eastern origins. Some talked of a clash of civilizations and some fomented the idea that Muslims and Arabs (and the line of distinction between them is blur in the minds of many) are evil and are to be dealt with only on these basis.

Meanwhile the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories continued to deteriorate in an unprecedented way. After a much hoped for lull in violence that started mid-December 2001 and lasted for more than 3 weeks, Israel resumed its abhorrent targeted killings policy against a Palestinian militant.

As if it was intended to provoke a violent wave of Palestinian retribution, the Israeli act achieved its goal.

On March 28th 2002, the Arab Summit in Beirut adopted a peace initiative presented by the Saudi Crown Prince. The initiative was simple and based on the major principle of peace-making in the region: it offered Israel full relations with countries of the Arab World in exchange for its withdrawal from all the Occupied Arab Territories and the resolution of all outstanding issues with the Palestinians. It was unprecedented and historic. But it was to be turned down by Israel.

On the same day, the long-awaited "triggering act" came to Israel in the form of a heinous bombing in a celebration hall. The Israeli army swept the West Bank, besieged President Arafat and the rest of the population and proceeded in a campaign of destruction and suffocation of the Palestinian civilian population. The world stood by and watched as it let itself believe that these were the acts of a country acting in self-defense and hence was entitled to do all it can in order to secure its citizens. Few paid attention to the fact that 35 years of military occupation only breed violence, and that economic siege, inhuman blockades and daily humiliation only nurture hatred and revenge. The US watched idly by as Israel ignored an "enough is enough" call from the US President and as it executed its declared objective of dismantling the Palestinian Authority and attempting to render its Chairman politically irrelevant.

The region was consumed by the bloody campaign and its repercussions for almost three months. The perceived green light given by the US to Israel was especially damaging to the already-suffering US image in the region. Arabs were watching angrily as Israel pursued a ruthless policy of collective punishment, demolition of houses, deportation, siege and economic starvation against the Palestinian civilian population. Arab streets were inflamed with daily demonstrations and pressure was mounting for a tougher Arab stand toward both Israel and the US.

Then came the period of renewing political work inaugurated by the June 24th speech of the US President. This phase is still ongoing and it is difficult to foresee what it might lead to in terms of resolving the Arab Israeli conflict especially in view of the declared Israeli positions aimed reneging all previous agreements with the Palestinians.

As soon as the dust of the Israeli military campaign began to settle, heated rhetoric resumed out of Washington on the second phase of its war on terrorism. Iraq was again the issue. The United States was caught in a spiral of media opinions and administration leaks all designed to make a case against Iraq. At the time of preparing this paper, the US President was to address

the UN on his administration's rationale on the issue and to seek international support for it.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that Israel is the only country that is officially and openly advocating a "pre-emptive" US strike against Iraq. Britain, the historic ally of the US, has internal dissident voices on the issue.

Arabs view this latest development with anguish and tremendous skepticism. The rhetoric of war in Washington, citing the regime's quest for WMDs, was focusing on regime change in Iraq while occasionally talking about the importance of building a democracy in that country to become a beacon for the rest of the region. Skepticism was also compounded by what has been becoming increasingly known as the Bush doctrine, which consists of using military power to pre-empt a perceived threat against the US. The use of these words brought back to the Arab side ugly memories of the Israeli policy of striking its Arab foes first in order to "preempt" their alleged attacks on it. The infamous agression the Arabs were subject to in June 1967 was waged by Israel under this pretext.

Arab politicians, pundits and even lay people drew a parallel between the US position vis-a-vis Iraq and Israel's actions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as well as the US-Israeli insistence on issues such as changing the democratically elected leader of the Palestinian Authority. The only possible conclusion they could reach was that the two countries were engaged, in tandem, in a drive to redraw the political map in the Middle East. They saw Iraq and Palestine as first on a list of change long sought by Israel. They saw other countries in the region targeted by this line of strategic steps. They added up several other elements such as the unprecedented tension in US Saudi relations, the differences occurring between the US and its long time ally Egypt as well as factors related to Oil politics and they reached a conclusion whereby the US is perceived to be seeking, in coordination with Israel, to extend control over the region's oil reserves and re-arrange the political situation in the region in favor of Israel. It is worth noting here that the majority of those expressing these views are not supportive of the Iraqi regime. Their consideration is not about the fate of one person or even one regime (albeit legitimate) but goes beyond, to the fate of a significant Arab country and the stability of their own region.

The fear of chaos and anarchy as well as the potential repercussions for the neighboring countries were all in the minds of Arab Governments when they expressed opposition to military action against Iraq in the official meetings of the Arab League. This is entirely *in sync* with the Arab public opinion.

Whether this is a correct reading of the past and present events, the coming days and months will show us. In the meantime, political work continues and Egypt, as always, remains firmly engaged to steer this region to stability and peace away from anarchy and war.

Remarks and conclusion:

First: It is often said, and rightly so, that terrorism should not be rewarded. Acquisition of land by force and occupation should not be rewarded neither. The historic and legitimate right of resisting military occupation is inalienable and constitutes a natural reaction to its abhorent tactics. In the Arab view, and for as long as Israeli military occupation of Arab and Palestinian lands continues, this right will continue to be legitimately exercised. However, resistance to occupation is not, and should not be, solely comprised of the use of "human bombs" against civilians inside the pre 67 border of Israel. This use has been more damaging to the support of the Palestinian cause worldwide than any other factor. Many Arabs and Palestinians realize that. Yet, in the context of the war on terrorism declared by the US after September 11, the whole array of means for resisting occupation inside the Palestinian occupied territory has also been covered by the "blanket condemnation" of terrorism. In the absence of any meaningful, realistic and just approach to restoring the Palestinian and Arab rights, it is difficult to see how an end to all sorts of resistance can be brought to an effective end.

Second: The basis of settling the Arab Israeli conflict, including the question of Palestine, are known to all. The independent viable state of Palestine has to be established. They include the complete Israeli withdrawal from all the occupied Arab territories including Jerusalem as well as settling outstanding issues with the Palestinians and agreeing on specific and mutual security arrangements which guarantee the security of all parties in the region. These arrangements should not be addressed in isolation, but in conjunction, with the other political elements of the peace-making equation in the region. At the end of the process, the establishment of normal relations between Arab countries and Israel can take place as provided for in the Arab initiative adopted by the Beirut Summit.

The failure to understand and act upon this equation will only result in more victims, a veto from extremists on both sides on the fate of peace in the region and a real threat to world stability.

Third: It has been amply demonstrated that Israel, emboldened by unprecedented US support in a logic that escapes most Arabs, has been consistently reneging on its contractual undertakings. This is a serious and dangerous course of action chosen by Israel. It undermines the very foundation of peace making in the Middle East. After five decades of hostility with the Arab world, and three decades of military occupation of the Palestinian people, it is not at all sure whether Israel is prepared to accept and live with an equally independent and viable Palestinian state next to it, albeit on 22% of the original land of historic Palestine. The Arab initiative, supported by the whole international community, presented Israel with a generous Arab offer based on the only viable formula of peace making in the region: land for peace. The refusal by Israel to engage with its neighbors on the basis of this internationally accepted formula would only result in the continuation of conflict, instability and bloodshed and stalling of development for the whole region.

Fourth: It is important to note that all the peoples of the region aspire to a better life. Modernity in all its aspects has been an issue in Middle East – specifically Arab - internal debates for years. Some societies were able to adapt to the needs of modernity better and faster than others. However, the overall situation in the region proved to require a more dedicated and thoughtful effort in order to achieve people's aspirations in stability, freedom and prosperity. These aspirations are achieved through hard work as well as a variety of other essential elements including democracy, sound economic policies and social justice. Most Governments in the region fully realize the challenges represented by these factors. In addition to national efforts, there is a great need for the assistance of external parties in order to achieve desired progress. Extending hands of partnerships, not the stick of pressure and sanctions, is the right way to address this need.

Fifth and last: The threat or use of force against an Arab country (Iraq) on the basis of its violation of UN Security Council resolutions seems puzzling to the majority of Arabs. It represents a flagrant application of double standards especially when Israeli practices are brought into consideration. The overwhelming majority in the Arab world disagrees with the conclusion that Iraq - exhausted by international sanctions – continue to pose a threat to its neighbors. The same majority, on the other hand, perceives Israel as the one country in the region posing real threat to its neighbors. After all, it is said, Israel has been occupying Arab land for 35 years, repressing an entire civilian population, violating international law almost on daily basis and remains the only country in the Middle East not

signatory of the NPT. If this is not a record warranting immediate action against Israel (albeit political or symbolic), what would be. Feelings of injustice and incapacity can be - and are effectively - exploited by those who seek to undermine the stability of the region. Work should be pursued in order to keep the hope alive and rectify those grave feelings of injustice if we are to establish a stable and peaceful Middle East.
