

Chapter Seven

Looking for Lessons: What Transitions from across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Can Offer the Middle East

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There are good reasons to be skeptical about transplanting lessons from the Balkans, or any part of the world for that matter, to the tumult in the Middle East once known as “the Arab Spring.” Indeed, comparing the countries of the Maghreb or Levant with their neighbors across the Mediterranean and along the Adriatic seems mainly to bring yawning differences into sharper relief. Whether Albanian or Serb, Bosniak (Muslim) or Croat (Catholic), Macedonian or Montenegrin, the core outlook and cultural fundament in the Balkan region is, in contrast to the Arab world, decidedly European.¹ Despite their bloody wars in the 1990s and continuing mutual suspicions, the vast majority of the feuding Balkan peoples at least share a common “destination”—becoming a modern European country with functioning markets, in which individual rights are respected, rule of law prevails, and religion is largely separated from the state. In sharp contrast with the Middle East, the ethno-religious tussle in the Balkans is largely over the question of who will control the levers of state power, but not (with a few exceptions) over the fundamental character of that power.

From Syria to Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, however, sectarian tensions are freighted not only by the question of “who rules?” but stretch to deeper questions over the character of the state, the role of religion, the degree of tolerance for individual rights and women’s rights, education and more. The same holds true in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, where deep differences in fundamental outlook animate divisions that may also have a tribal or competitive “who rules?” component. In short, the bitter conflicts in the Balkans may

¹Turkey, which has widely invoked as a model for the Middle East, is not part of this discussion of the Western Balkans.

run deep, but they are usually not very wide; while the Middle East is riven by a vast gulf of differences over the fundamental questions about the character of the state, as well as by deep mutual suspicions.

Another reason for skepticism is that the Arab Uprisings, which began in Tunisia, have already had more influence on the Balkans and elsewhere than vice-versa. From Tahrir Square to Taksim Square to Sarajevo's Bosnia-Herzegovina Square, citizens have drawn inspiration from the outpouring of protests (and the clever use of social media) that brought down Ben Ali and Mubarak—despite the chaos in Egypt, the horrific violence in Syria, and the instability in Libya that has ensued. The “Occupy” movement that began in the U.S. also has had a major influence on Balkan protests—but it was the Arab Spring that served as the original inspiration for “Occupy.”

Moreover, this year's angry protests in Bosnia have called into question more than the misrule spawned by an unwieldy governing structure and an array of elected, but unaccountable, politicians. The international community and even representative democracy itself have become the targets of protester ire, as Bosnians, like so many in Europe, voice their disillusionment over established, nominally democratic institutions and ineffective prescriptions. The great irony is that while protesters in the Middle East were (at the outset of the Arab Spring) expressing long-suppressed discontent with authoritarian rule and demanding democratic reforms, established democracy itself has taken a major hit in Europe, with perceived corruption, endless austerity amidst economic stagnation and, as in the Middle East, a sense of dwindling opportunity. Developments in countries like Hungary, whose leader has rolled back on a range of democratic protections, have called into question the value of the ballyhooed EU accession process.

So, as disappointment over the Arab Spring is matched by disillusionment with conventional democracy in Europe, now is a good time not just to impart lessons from the Balkans to the Middle East, but perhaps to exchange them in both directions. Angry Bosnians infused by radical left-wing ideology might do well to reflect on the mass dissatisfaction of Egyptians who, after only a year of misrule by the ideologically driven Muslim Brotherhood, eagerly embraced a decidedly non-democratic regime simply because it promised an end to chaos. The failed Egyptian experiment with a radical shift in ideological

direction should be a reminder to Bosnians that, in the end, the government must meet the basic needs of the people. Embracing tried-and-true EU reforms, however tedious and imperfect, to build up the country's existing, conventional institutions will have a better chance of meeting those needs than a radical, ideologically driven agenda that might, as in Egypt, end up in disaster if actually attempted.

As for lessons that the Middle East could learn, clearly the most significant one—if the most difficult to apply—is the value of having national consensus on the country's strategic orientation. The best example of this from the Balkans is in Serbia and Kosovo, which last year managed to put their longstanding conflict into a new perspective by agreeing to “normalize relations.” This breakthrough was wholly driven by the shared interest among most Serbs and Kosovars to join the European Union. While some in each country can criticize the normalization deal, few challenge the core incentive for compromise: advancing the country's relationship with the EU. In turn, this reinforced national consensus has already helped stem the dangerous attraction of “Greater Albania” in Kosovo, and the flirtation that some Serbs have had with Russia as a potential alternative to the EU. Both of these dubious trends, which promised only internal divisiveness, are now marginalized. The emerging consensus on joining the EU has managed to narrow political differences, from broad ideological battles to more productive discussions over how to develop institutions, fight corruption and grow the economy. Croatia, which joined the EU last year, exemplifies the transformative power of the EU. Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic, herself a former civil society activist, credits the “mundane tasks” associated with the EU accession process with reframing charged, polarizing debate.²

Unfortunately, the countries of the Middle East cannot join the EU or NATO, or any other supra-national organization that might have such a channeling effect on debate, but that should not stop civil society or political leaders from the search for a national project on which national consensus could be built. Cleaning up the environment, for example, is a subject that is not intrinsically divisive. While struggling to come to terms over intensely sensitive questions over religious

²Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic speaking at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC on February, 28, 2014.

rights, the rights of women, or other issues that come up when writing a Constitution, civil society and political leaders could actively explore ways to work across the sectarian and religious divide and forge national consensus on unifying issues like the environment. By opening up space for, say in Egypt, the most conservative Islamist voices to join with young civil society activists and officials in a structured conversation over environmental laws, the possibility for the beginning of dialogue on other, more sensitive matters might emerge.

Imparting another lesson from the Balkans, dialogue is an area where the international community could, in principle, be of active assistance. Nearly every international organization, as well as a battery of international NGOs, has endeavored for years to foster some kind of dialogue, if not full reconciliation, in the Balkans. One of the most striking efforts in this regard has occurred in Kosovo—not between feuding Serbs and Albanians, but actually within the divided Serb community itself. Spearheaded by U.S.-based NGO activists, the initiative has brought those Serbs in the south who actively cooperate with the Albanian-led government in Kosovo together with those in the north who see such cooperation as traitorous. While divisions remain, the effort has diminished the demonization which had plagued the divided Serb community. Transplanting such experiences to a place like Egypt is complicated by the hostility shown toward the work of international NGOs so far, but indigenous Egyptian civil society groups do not face the same barriers and could, as the U.S.-group working in Kosovo did, identify real opportunities to serve as catalysts for much-needed dialogue.

However, Bosnia offers another less encouraging lesson on the limits of dialogue that might keep expectations in check for countries like Syria and Iraq that are torn by sectarian violence. There has been no fighting in Bosnia since the war ended nearly two decades ago, but despite outside dialogue interventions that began literally in the earliest days after the peace agreement was signed, ethnic communities remain deeply polarized. Even though there is full freedom of movement in the country, a common language, and as noted above a shared European orientation, suspicion, not trust, still pervades. The lesson here is that even the best-designed dialogue interventions will hit hard limits if not matched by larger progress on the political questions which divide communities. Bosnians may have stopped fighting a long

time ago, but some leaders have openly proclaimed their opposition to the country's common institutions and, especially at election time, made naked appeals to the narrow ethnic interest.

Dialogue can help attenuate the slide towards polarization, but will fall far short of the goal of true reconciliation if not matched by real progress on larger political questions. If Iraq's government continues to play such a polarizing role, no one should expect NGO or other efforts to bridge dialogue to achieve widespread results. Failing to accept the predominance of political dynamics is to set unrealistic expectations for ground-up dialogue.

Experience in the Balkans teaches us that there is really no substitute for a viable, well-constructed peace agreement when it comes to managing ethno-sectarian violence. For example, theorists have for years been touting trade and economic growth as the panacea for continuing divisions in Bosnia. Unfortunately, rather than improve relations, external trade has actually exacerbated the country's division. This is because the deeply flawed Dayton peace accord attained peace by splitting the country into two asymmetrical entities. The more cohesive, largely mono-ethnic Serb entity of Republika Srpska has the ability to set its own trade and economic policies, and even engage directly with EU institutions independently from its counterpart entity, the Bosniak-Croat "Federation." So, the ability of the RS to progress economically while the split, unwieldy Federation remains mired in wasteful administration and political division, has only further inclined Serbs to want even less to do with the country's central government in Sarajevo. The RS President, Milorad Dodik, has even proposed outright separation of his entity from Bosnia—a step that would bring the country into serious conflict, while opening up the Pandora's Box of revanchist claims and nationalist projects around the region. Meanwhile, internal trade between the two entities, abetted by freedom of movement, has done little to knit the communities together.

By contrast, Macedonia is another deeply challenged and divided Balkan country, whose economic growth has not been a cause for more fracturing. This is because its peace accord, the Ohrid Agreement, did not rest on the ethno-territorial model applied in Bosnia. Instead, the country's vying parties—ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians—agreed to terms wholly without reference to territory.

Instead, the Albanians (who, were they given compact territory, might well emulate the Bosnian Serbs in their optimal desire to separate from Macedonia), accepted a deal which increases their rights within the country's existing territorial structure. This "Ohrid Agreement" created no new territorial units, not even cantons or new municipalities. Instead, power was substantially shifted from the central state to existing municipal units—a step that benefitted predominantly Macedonian municipalities as well as Albanian ones. Additionally, "Ohrid" simultaneously boosted Albanian powers and representation at the level of the central government, increasing their incentive to actively participate in state-level institutions. This means that the group with the greatest incentive to secede—the Albanians—has no foundation on which to build a proto-state (like the RS has in Bosnia), and has very good reason to participate in the country's central institutions (unlike the Bosnian Serbs who see development of the central government in Sarajevo as a threat to their entity). The fact that tensions still exist between Macedonians and Albanians only reinforces the value of their agreement; they like and trust each other no more than do Bosnia's Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, but they act in ways that keep the state functioning.³

These lessons might yet be of value to Syrians, if the day ever comes when the parties there engage in serious peace talks. There's no doubt that Alawites and Kurds will both demand some form of defined territory within the new Syrian state. Applying the lessons from Bosnia and Macedonia, peacemakers must make every effort to provide the state that emerges with integrative characteristics. As in Macedonia, a well-designed balance of local rights and centralized powers can create incentives for productive inter-action, avoiding the pitfall of highly autonomous regions that serve only to perpetuate centrifugal dynamics, and therefore, conflict.

At the other extreme, given the perpetuation of sectarian strife in Iraq today, clearly that country might have benefitted from a modicum of federalization along the lines created for Bosnia, not just with respect to the existing Kurdistan regional government, but between

³Tensions between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians would be markedly lessened if the country could Greece would relent and allow the country to proceed into NATO membership and full EU candidacy.

the two most implacable groups, the minority Sunnis and the majority Shiites whose leadership seems intent on exploiting Baghdad's centralized powers for maximum sectarian advantage. In other words, there are benefits from the ethno-territorial solution in terms of providing group security—as well as risks in going too far by putting the ethnic sub-unit into antagonism with the central government.

Lebanon's lasting, but less-than-stable inter-confessional arrangement no doubt also offers some lessons that might be applied—or avoided—in an eventual Syrian peace agreement. Though this system was the end-product of French occupation, Lebanon, Syria, Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia all share a common Ottoman heritage. In tackling the pernicious challenge of tribal and ethno-sectarian violence in the Middle East, it might be useful, as a starting point of analysis, to distinguish all areas which were under longstanding Ottoman rule from those in the Maghreb that developed independently from the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. The legacy of the millet system and the overall Ottoman approach to managing ethno-religious tensions is present across the former empire, from the Balkans through the Levant. There should be no surprise that additional similarities emerge between countries like Iraq and Bosnia, each of which has three dominant groups and whose Ottoman foundation was eventually succeeded by a form of socialism.

In sum, the Balkans share an Ottoman legacy and ethno-religious strife with large swathes of the Middle East—but do *not* share their pronounced, uniformly European orientation nor the possibility for every Balkan country to join Euro-Atlantic institutions. So, in the search for lessons, it makes sense to cast the net wider to another part of the world which has also produced notable transition success stories.

Latin America has seen a remarkable transformation almost throughout the continent from extremist right- and left-wing dictatorships to mostly functioning democracies. Unlike the Balkans, however, democratic progress was not achieved in a burst after the end of the Cold War with a headlong plunge to NATO and the EU, but rather as a slow, largely home-grown effort with multi-party elections the last—not first—step in the transition.

Mexico and Chile stand out as particularly notable examples. In each case, the catalyst for reform came from within as the ruling ele-

ments, PRI (in Mexico) and Pinochet regime (in Chile), felt the pressure for reform from within the middle class and business community that saw the benefits of integrating with—and fitting in with—the world economy. The PRI and Pinochet began to liberalize in the belief that small reforms would increase the longevity of their rule. Indeed, much of the 1980s saw their continuity at the top of Mexico and Chile, respectively. But what began as small openings eventually yielded highly significant, incipient change from the bottom as opposition political parties, civil society, human rights groups and the media all began, step-by-step, to take advantage of openings.

In this approach, elections were the crowning piece of a bottom-up process of cultivating both democratic institutions and democratic values. Indeed, Vicente Fox, the first opposition figure to win the Presidency in modern Mexican history, was not elected until the year 2000. But unlike Egypt, Mexico has steadily progressed on the democratic path after its election milestone. Despite the challenge of drug-related violence which, like terrorism, might have justified a return toward general authoritarianism, democracy remains ever more rooted in Mexico. And unlike Hungary, which has backslid on its EU-mandated reforms, Chile has as well made remarkable, continuous democratic and economic strides after jettisoning its authoritarian regime.

It is not too late for even Egypt, not to mention the far more encouraging Tunisia, to learn from the Mexican and Chilean experiences. Bereft of the unifying force and tutelage of the European Union, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other countries of the Middle East could emulate the slow-and-steady approach to democracy in Latin America, gradually liberalizing while inculcating the values of pluralism, tolerance, accountability and rule of law that infuse democratic institutions and undergird even the most enlightened Constitutions. Indeed, Middle Eastern monarchies like Jordan and Morocco seem to be moving down this tortoise-not-the-hare path towards democracy. When the time comes for transition to full democratic rule, the prospects could be improved for moderate forces—and society at large—to be prepared.

Latin America also offers an encouraging example in the struggle that the Middle East faces in dealing with the other bane of democratic development: Islamist extremism. In Latin America, Commu-

nism served for decades as a useful foil for the region's authoritarian regimes, justifying crackdowns which, in turn, only increased the appeal of revolutionary socialism practiced in Cuba. Even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, the luster of Castro-ism began to fade. Those countries, like Mexico and Chile, that began the hard work of developing the foundations for democratic rule were poised to eventually take advantage when Communism was further discredited. In unreformed Venezuela and, to a lesser degree, Bolivia, no such alternatives were in place, creating the opening for a collectivist dictatorship in Venezuela and a crusading left-wing government in Bolivia. In Peru, however, the recent return of an avowedly left-wing president has not fundamentally altered the country's democratic and market oriented direction. Democratic values and institutions have progressed enough in Peru for antagonists (the government and the business community) to forge compromise instead of resorting to extremism and polarization.

Unfortunately, as long as Iran remains a theocracy, the Middle East may lack its "Cuba," i.e., a failed ideologically-based regime whose collapse discredits not just the regime, but the ideology as well. The collapse of Muhammed Morsi's winner-take-all approach to governance has surely discredited the Muslim Brotherhood, but it remains to be seen if that antipathy extends to the appeal of heavy-handed "political Islam" or its authoritarian expression in a non-Arab country like Iran. It may take time and enlightenment not yet in evidence, but proud Egypt, once the beacon of the entire Islamic world, might one day become a model for the region to follow if its leaders embrace the examples of the most successful Latin American democracies and allow openings for real democratization. Tunisia, the launching pad for the then-called Arab Spring, might also fulfill this exemplary role if it builds on its successful, nearly two-plus-year Constitution-writing exercise with a continued effort to inculcate the values of pluralism, civility, tolerance, and rule of law in a way in which otherwise opposed elements of society can find their place. While one must be realistic about the prospects for such strife-torn countries as Syria and Iraq, one can at least hope for the day when countries like Tunisia or even Libya and Egypt will themselves be examined as the source of positive lessons for aspiring democracies.