

No Shortcuts, Nor Alternatives

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Italians are seen as “the West’s human face,” by a cultural mentality very suspicious of other Western countries. It might seem a cliché, but it should not be ignored. It’s a great asset for Italy in Egypt and other places in the region. It’s what analysts call “soft power.” And there’s a lot we can do to consolidate that power.

An assessment of the prospects for peace in the Middle East today doesn’t inspire much optimism. The situation is in fact white-hot. Despite what popular consensus believes, we are not facing a perpetual rekindling of old problems and familiar conflicts but a totally new situation.

For decades after World War II and up until ten or fifteen years ago, people thought that “the mother of all problems” was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the resolution of which would settle the entire [Middle East](#) [2] question. Of course, beginning in 1990, as the [Soviet Union](#) [3] was breaking up, there was the first Iraqi war, restaged a dozen years later, yet people still believed that the conflict arose from issues that had been clearly identified and defined.

Instead, beginning in those years, we opened a Pandora’s box that revealed the situation in the region was much more complex than previously believed. Today all eyes are on the region; never



before have we seen the development of so many different conflicts at the same time. Just think. Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Gaza.

How did we get here? Setting aside the fact that the conflicts have accumulated, unheeded by both the regional players and the international community. In hindsight, we can say that from the end of the Cold War to September 11, the international agenda has been strictly “European.” We turned our attention elsewhere—from the Balkans to the expansion of the European Union—and ignored the so-called southern hemisphere, where the major threats to international peace, safety and stability were meanwhile brewing.

Thus there was a deficit of analysis of the fomentations underway, as well as a deficit of actions, or inadequate actions, taken by the West. For example, people thought that a military solution was possible in Iraq and Libya, and that booting out autocratic regimes would have led to the development of democracies— stabilizing in and of themselves.

What Went Wrong

Clearly this has not occurred. Why? Because, more than a conflict among dictators and “democratic forces” fighting for freedom and rights, we are faced with sectarian violence and conflicts between tribes that pounced on one another as soon as the dictatorships fell. Furthermore these groups are usually linked to “outside sponsors” that fomented the conflicts by proxy, behind which not immediately apparent regional agendas were being hidden. A deficit of analysis, therefore. And faulty or inadequate analysis can lead to nothing but faulty or inadequate policy.

Without absolving the West, however, it must be said that other international players also dallied too long. While the UN, which emerged right after the Cold War, was in decline, no other emerging entity took direct responsibility for the region, neither the so-called BRIC nor the G20, nor anyone else.

All responsibility continued to rest on the shoulders of the West, America in particular, never mind that peace and stability in the Middle East is a common good in everyone’s interest and entails collective responsibility. The result is that we find ourselves facing two major sets of problems in the Middle East. On the one hand, we have the problem of sectarian and tribal violence mentioned earlier.

On the other, there are structural issues plaguing these societies; large portions of the population are not only impoverished but also disenfranchised and disempowered, blighted by high rates of both literal and political illiteracy, so that large swathes of people here can be manipulated and taken advantage of by violent groups aimed at nurturing conflict. How can we get out of this situation? It’s useless to kid ourselves into thinking this can be done quickly. But there are a few positive directions to take.

What Should Be Done

Firstly, on the level of international diplomacy, there’s a need to take concrete, multilateral action. As Europeans and Westerners, we can do more and better, employing better-organized strategies and more coherent, unilateral actions. But even that isn’t sufficient. The problems of the Middle East cannot be resolved by Western fiat but by taking actions that include the various regional and international entities.

Secondly, as far as regards our country, Italy stands to play a very positive role. In part it already does, given Italy’s non-divisive character. That character already means a lot and has been looked upon positively in the region. As an institutional observer in the area, I have noticed a great willingness among the local population to communicate with us. There is a strong sense of “human chemistry” with Italy and Italians, who are seen as a Mediterranean people possessed of a unique sensibility, of human feeling not recognized in the nations of northern Europe.

This feeling is palpable in people from all social classes, from the man on the street to the politician



to the intellectual: Italians are seen as “the kind face of the West,” the West’s human face, by a cultural mentality very suspicious of other Western countries. It might seem a cliché, the idea that Italians are “good people,” but it should not be ignored. It’s a great asset for Italy in Egypt and other places in the region and can be a deciding factor in our foreign policy, obviously as long as it is sustained by the necessary human, economic and cultural resources.

This is what analysts call “soft power.” And there’s a lot we can do to consolidate that power: student exchange programs, educational grants, management courses, people-to-people encounters, especially among the younger generation, as well as initiatives for promoting “the finer things in life” that unite rather than divide populations, which Italy is rich in, such as culture, fashion, food, art. It might seem strange, but these are tools for diplomacy that have wide-reaching, applicable effects over medium-long periods of time.

And they necessitate economic resources for investment that we often, unfortunately, do not make available. Last but not least, there is the action being taken by the Pope. That he took the name Francis seems appropriate to me, given the symbolism linked to the idea of world peace due in part to the Saint’s voyage to the Holy Land during the Crusades, where he succeeded in meeting the Sultan of Egypt and sued for peace, however fruitlessly.

Pope Francis is an inclusive figure, the bearer of a message that has been received positively here. Naturally, Islamic extremists will not tolerate living with Christians, neither in the region nor in the world. They aspire to present these conflicts as a clash of civilizations. But for the moderates, seeing a Catholic pope take decisive positions in favor of peace, as Francis has, serves to underscore that the conflict is not between the Christian and Islamic worlds.

The conflict, as I began by saying, resides within the Islamic world, between a moderate Islam that wants to coexist with the West and an extremist Islam that remains irreconcilable with both Islamic moderates and the West. Resolving the issue is a long-term job. But it’s a job we must take up immediately and for which there are no shortcuts, nor alternatives.

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