

Reflection on Arab World Region-building before “Arab Spring”: obstacles and perspectives.

Written by alberto russo

Saturday, 22 September 2012 09:12 - Last Updated Monday, 05 February 2018 16:27

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Introduction.

Through this paper I would to point out some brief reasoning on the problematic question of Arab regional integration in the Middle East: why the scholars argue about a continual failure of Pan-Arab supranational entities and which are the main realistic prospective of the Region-building phenomenon in the Arab Middle East.

Dealing with this issues firstly I would define the precise burdens of Arab Middle East and then I would focus the attention on the main elements that could had fostered a regional integration for Arab States and on the obstacles that had precluded it.

After that I would try to briefly define a possible model of starting integration on economic issues between sub-regional entities (GCC and MAFTA to name but two) in the general framework of the region as I defined above, with reference to the EU regional model.

Finally I would conclude arguing my thesis: today it's it too premature trying to identify a clear road map for a future possible Arab regional integration like the EC-EU one, instead of most of the basic conditions are still present. In fact, from the scholars debate on this issue, what we can expect for the future is only the strengthening of the already integrated sub-regional economic organizations. Maybe we can suggest the creation of strong commercial partnerships between the different sub-regions through the institution of an independent judicial panel that can promote a “by-case” integration, following the traces of ECJ.

The concept of Arab Middle East, Arab Identity and the barriers for a regional strength

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integration.

Between the scholars of M.E. issue there is a big debate on a clear determination of this region's boundaries: geographically speaking the major part of scholars defines Middle East as “the core countries of the Levant, the Gulf and the Nile Valley, together with Turkey, Iran and North Africa”[2].

But if we insert the Arab element to this formula the boundaries of the region change and are reduced or partially shifted: Turkey, Iran and Israel go away for different reasons[3], and states like Somalia and Comoros come in. So what can we deduce from these definitions?

The Arab World is bigger than the simple M.E., as well as the M.E. isn't only Arab.

But if we want to fix the boundaries of “Arab Region” in terms of our dealing we take into consideration only the North Africa, the Gulf (included Iraq) and the Great Mediterranean Asian countries[4].

What we identify here with the term “Arab Region” is not properly a common definition of region as a part of a continent in geographical terms, but something more social and cultural: a whole of elements that create a common Pan-Arab identity[5].

This Arab entity share a common written language, a common Islamic culture and tradition and, maybe not less important, a common ethnicity, even though with specific exceptions of minorities (Kurds, Berbers, Negroids) leaving in parts of above mentioned states. If we add the political and ideological concept of Pan-Arabic brotherhood and identity, we cannot understand why this great potential conglomerate of States and ideas hasn't established a realist form of regional integration.

The reason of this failure are many, both socio-political and economical.

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First of all, the main problem concern the presence of not democratic regimes, such as Socialist Ba'th ones and the existence of kingdoms, emirates and sultans that not share their sovereignty with their people or with supranational institutions. These regimes, which are not based on the principle of the rule of law (even in the Islamic vision), are characterized by the presence of secret polices, lack transparency, corruption, lack of independent media, a quite absolute control of education and legal system.

This condition, even though not acceptable from a western vision, is due to the past experience of exogenous dependences of these states from non-Arab Entities: the Ottoman Empire, European colonialism. Arab states want to affirm each one his own properly identity as peculiar Nation, in the broaden framework of Arabic community. They didn't want, and still today, they don't want compromise their sovereignty in strong supranational entities. Then, if we add to this picture the presence of a strong western culture state, as Israel is, we can better understand how this has generated a sort of instability in the area[6] and thus has contributed to form a sort of complex of inferiority between Arabs and the Westerns.

Another barrier to a dynamics regionalism in the Arab area concerns some economic and market issues that can be summarized in the strong domestic interest in developing national economies, due to the diversification of resources (oil and gas for some States, ship-related services for some others, agriculture for others else) and the related the strong comparative advantages that this phenomenon creates on the exportations to third countries, in the relative-small seizure of markets, in scarce interest of major Arab states to incentive a trade-market system that involves also smaller States.

Concluding this part of the paper we can argue that all the condition to develop a realistic regional integration are present in the contest, but – in the reverse of the medal – they are also the condition that preclude this integration.

A possible model.

Despite these arguments the idea of a regional organization which was in Europe EEC is not completely prevented in framework *de quo*: examples can be founded at sub-regional level in the Gulf Cooperation Council vision and in the Mediterranean Arab Free Trade Area projects.

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These two entities, each one with his main characteristic typical of the respective areas and sub-regional dynamics and partnerships, following the model offered by European have developed two concrete form of well integrated (in Western terms) regional supranational subject.

The main common elements of the two FTAs are a quite well organized institution framework, in which is still present a judicial panel, and a structured series of rules and common procedures and trade practice, which are leading these entities beyond the failures of other Arab organizations.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, accordingly with the major part of scholars, we can argue that, with the exception of the above mentioned entities, the Arab Middle East as whole is not yet ready to develop a realistic regional integration. This does not mean that in the area others forms of limited seizure entities can be institutionalized, but the model of EU is too much advanced to be taken in to consideration.

So other models, but which one? It's also difficult to think at an ECSC model because we cannot see in the area the minimum condition to create such type of organization. Which sector? If we reason about water resources, we have to face with two big problems, Israel and Turkey, which control the main sources of the blue gold of the area; but this two countries are excluded by definition from our framework.

The only way to develop a model of possible regional integration comports a strengthening of the principle of rule law, also in the Islamic vision. A second step could be the creation of a Pan-Arab Free Trade Area, establishing at same a permanent and independent Islamic Arab Court of Justice, that can enforce and promote the agreed vision of developing entity.

- Paper written in 2009.

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[2] M. Legrenzi – C. Harders, in *Beyond Regionalism? Regional Cooperation, Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East*, Introduction, Farnham: Ashgate, 2008, p.1.

[3] Turkey and Israel go away for ethnic and political reasons almost related to their belonging to the western culture, while Iran goes away more for cultural matters (which include the Shiite vision of Islam) .

[4] So I mean: Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Yemen.

[5] Arab regionalism “has its core concept in the notion of awareness, identity and consciousness. These concepts link with social and cultural factors, like the common language, religion and traditions. They relate to common external perceptions involving either political treats or cultural challenges”. In other terms “Arabs, regardless of country of origin, share the perception of belonging to a particular community”. - ref. from E.J. Kirchner, *The European Union as a Model for Regional Integration: The Muslim World and Beyond*, in J. Monnet/R. Schuman Paper series Vol. 6, n. 1, January 2006, p. 3.

[6] I refer to the series of conflicts between Arabs (not only Palestinians) and Israelis, always win by the latter.