

“Middle Easterner”: A Regionalism Denied

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MORE THAN HALF A MILLENNIUM ago, Portugal's Vasco da Gama discovered an alternative all-water passage to India and the Orient via the Cape of Good Hope. By diverting Europe's lucrative spice trade from the traditional Mediterranean and overland caravan routes, he transformed the Levant (the area including present-day Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel/Palestine) from a leading center of commerce to an economic, political and cultural backwater.

Complacency in 1498 cost the inhabitants of the region dearly. Indeed, only in the present era has the Middle East begun to recover its lost pride, economic and geo-strategic prominence, and political independence. However, in this post-cold war moment of renewed opportunity and potential, the region's own internal shortcomings and the shortsightedness of its leaders once again combine with world trends in threatening to leave all peoples of the Middle East—Arabs and Iranians, Israelis, and Turks—far behind the global learning curve.

With this in mind, the perspective expressly adopted here is neither Israeli nor nationalist, but supra-nationalist, i.e., the perspective of a “Middle Easterner.” I define a Middle Easterner as a permanent resident in the region stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, from the refugee camps of Gaza to the sparkling lights of Doha. In looking at long-term prospects, I harbor serious misgivings about preserving both the independence and collective viability of the Middle East. I believe that the only way to meet this challenge is through functional Middle Eastern regionalization, defined in this paper as a means of generating a minimal, survivalist regional consciousness leading, in turn, to a demonstrable surge in economic growth and a modified sense of identity. Further, regionalization includes learning protocols for cooperation and multilateralism, spreading confidence-building, and substituting bloc politics for blocking politics and urgency for complacency.

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MIDDLE EASTERN “DECLINISM”

The comparative position of the larger Middle East region is eroding. Our downward trajectory is confirmed by empirical evidence, beginning with the four Arab Human Development Reports sponsored by The United Nations Development Programme. Compiled “by Arabs for Arabs,” the first of these pioneering surveys, published in 2002, notes the poor state of human resource development in the region; identifies critical deficits of knowledge on political freedoms and women’s empowerment; and challenges leaders and societies across the region to overcome these obstacles to economic and social progress.¹

Subsequent reports examine each of these topics in considerable depth. The 2003 report devoted to education and science warns of an overall knowledge gap that continues to widen. *Towards Freedom in the Arab World*, issued in 2004, emphasizes the region’s poor record on freedom and governance and observes how “current institutional arrangements for regional coordination have failed to give substantive support to Arab development, and to maintain security and peace in the Arab world.”²

Macroeconomic time studies and aggregate data reinforce this austere depiction of a failing region, with the Middle East continuing to score poorly on major indices of international economic performance:

306

- Thirty to 40 years ago, key Middle Eastern and North African nations were on par economically with Asian countries. Today, Egypt’s per capita income is less than one-fifth of South Korea’s, while the two nations’ incomes were equivalent in the 1950s. Morocco’s GDP was close to Malaysia’s; now, it is one-third of the Southeast Asian nation’s. Saudi Arabia had a higher GDP than Taiwan as well; today, its GDP is only half of Taiwan’s.

- Costa Rica, with a population roughly 5 percent that of Egypt, exports more than twice as many manufactured goods as Egypt.

- Total non-oil exports from the entire Middle East and North Africa (MENA) only equal Finland’s total exports.

- The cumulative GDP of all 22 Arab League countries, with a population of 340 million people, is less than that of Spain, and only half that of the United Kingdom or France.

Many countries in the region show low or even negative real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita growth rates over the last three decades:

“Middle Easterner”: A Regionalism Denied

- The MENA region continues to maintain the highest annual population growth rate in the world.
- Illiteracy runs at close to 40 percent across the region, triple that of Latin America and East Asia.
- Only 1.6 percent of the population has Internet access, and while the world average in computerization is 78.3 computers per 1,000 persons, the level in the Arab countries is 18 computers per 1,000.
- As many as 25 percent of Arabs live below the poverty line. One of every five lives on less than \$2 a day.
- Based upon current trends, unemployment in the region could rise from 15 million to 50 million in the coming decade.
- Only approximately 11 percent of the labor force works in manufacturing.

We need not linger in spelling out how ominous and chilling these future prospects may be, since numerous studies have explored the attendant social effects and likely political repercussions. Population growth, poverty, unemployment, and, in general, frustrated expectations have led to unrest, desperation, militancy, and religious extremism in the overcrowded slums and refugee camps that dot the heartland of the Middle East, from Cairo through Gaza and Ramallah to Amman. The result of these phenomena is a startling dearth of human resources. Talents are suppressed and left untapped; lives are callously snuffed out by incessant regional strife and bloodletting. The lack of women's rights in many places throughout the region furthers this problem. The United Nations Development Programme states, “At a time when the Arab world needs to build and tap the capabilities of all its peoples, fully half its human potential is often stifled or neglected.”³

Additionally, the region faces tell-tale signs of wasted energies and misdirected priorities. Characteristic of a region whose constituent countries are still motivated by suspicion and hawkishness in coping with insecurity dilemmas, regional militaries are disproportionately large. The Middle East maintains the highest ratio of military recruitment: 10.3 per 1,000 people under arms in comparison to the world average of 3.6 per 1,000. Collectively, and over the last 10 years, the annual average military expenditure by Middle Eastern countries averages some \$15 billion per annum. These expenditures exceed 21 percent of government budgets. By contrast, the average for developed countries is below 10 percent, and around 14.5 percent for developing countries. In 2002, at least four countries that were classified as low and middle-income (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Turkey) spent more on military budgets than on education or health. Such high defense spending means that, since 1967, the Middle East has had the dubious distinction of being the world's largest weapons importing

region. Arms constitute approximately 14.5 percent of all Middle East imports, versus a one percent average worldwide. And, perhaps most alarming of all, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute data, military spending in the Middle East increased by 57 percent in real terms over the ten-year period of 1997 to 2006, giving it the highest rate of military expenditure in the world.⁴

Other wasted resources include water and oil, neither of which recognize artificially-imposed political borders. The World Bank reports, for example, that the Middle

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East and North Africa suffer the world's lowest rate of net renewable water supplies. Today, the desert covers 60 percent of Israel, 70 percent of Syria, 85 percent of Jordan, and 90 percent of Egypt. Barring preliminary steps toward establishing a Mideast

water regime, with a strong mandate for negotiating intergovernmental agreements on the pooling of water resources, desertification is winning the timeless struggle between the desert and agriculturally viable lands.⁵

Oil, or "black gold," is another natural resources which the region possesses in abundance, if not in an unlimited supply. Yet, Middle Eastern petroleum deposits, reserves, and revenues are unevenly distributed and unequitably shared. For example, not a single thought is being given to channeling these assets in ways that might logically and pragmatically prevent extremist threats from the depressed "neighborhoods" of the Middle East to the oil-rich regimes and economies of the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf. Singularly notorious are the Arab League members of OPEC, who have broken their promise of delivering oil revenues to the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza Strip—an estimated \$717.1 million (of which only \$153.2 million had been delivered⁶), leaving the Palestinians impoverished. Even the Middle East Quartet has felt it necessary to urge "all donors who have not fulfilled their pledges, especially the key regional partners, to fulfill their pledges from the December 2007 Paris donors' conference."⁷ Further, oil profits are not reinvested in the Middle East; at present, an estimated \$1.3 trillion in Arab private capital is invested abroad rather than in the region. According to a recent estimate by the Institute for International Finance, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) invested only 11 percent of its estimated total capital outflows in the broader MENA region—about one-fifth of the amount invested in the United States.⁸

308

It is not surprising that in the United Nations' latest Human Development Reports—which rank countries based on per-capita income, educational levels, health care, and life expectancy—Israel, the highest-ranked Middle Eastern state, is only 23rd, followed by Kuwait in 33rd place.⁹ Despite the possibility of distortion, these statistics demonstrate at the very least that global growth trends are not necessarily extending to

the Middle East. The region has been one of the world's poorest economic performers for decades. In short, state incapacity has translated into collective regional disempowerment. Consequently, it seems that the Middle East is again reverting, as in 1498, to an economic and cultural backwater.

PATHOLOGICAL POLITICS

The problems of the Middle East are compounded by three pathological political behaviors. One of the most pernicious examples of Middle Eastern divisiveness is the Politics of Victimization. Its most obvious example is the Israelis and Palestinians, who take refuge in myths and comfort in self-righteousness, competing fiercely for the world's sympathy and for a symbolic international trophy in victimization, while actually raising the threshold of pain and loss in an unrelieved hurting stalemate.

A second pathology is the hateful Politics of Negativism, Resentment, and Revenge present throughout our singularly violent and unforgiving neighborhood. If aggressively settling scores is a uniquely Middle Eastern trait, closely related and no less pernicious is the tendency—both in interstate relations and in domestic politics—to subvert prospective mutual gains to past communal losses or to historic ethnic grievances. Still a third is the Politics of Scapegoating, whereby all of our own failings, rather than acknowledged, are exported, denied, explained away, excused, or attributed to sinister outside forces, whether they be imperialists, Zionists, heretics, infidels, or hegemonic superpowers.

The implications of self-righteousness, vengefulness, and externalizing direct responsibility for the current state of our own affairs, are not hard to see. They distort our regional agenda, divert us from the real priorities and immediate challenges, and prevent us from staking out any common ground.

Diagnostically, the present situation east of the Mediterranean qualifies as acute. Like our penchant for mortgaging the future to the past, the relentless pursuit of unilateralist policies by Middle Easterners—*all* Middle Easterners—is more than merely embarrassing. Whether labeled a "system," a "regime," a "framework," or an "umbrella," the lack of *any* integrated and indigenous response to regional issues and the absence of *any* regionalist paradigm encourages interference from foreigners eager to press upon us blueprints of their own design—whether those of the United States, Europe, the United Nations, or anywhere else outside the Middle East.

The decision not to go regional contributes a new and depressing chapter in the "culture of defeatism" that has long plagued our region. In effect, it conveys our choice in what Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, a foremost spokesman for Middle East integration, poses quite austerely as falling "between regionalism and barbarism."¹⁰

This much is clear: the decision is in our hands. So are the very real opportunity costs attached to our misplaced defiance of the global trend toward more inclusive partnerships and regionalism.

There is no small irony that those of us living in this geographically expansive region have long since adopted the artificial, Western “orientalist” convention of a “Middle East.” Yet we are nowhere near perceiving ourselves, let alone organizing ourselves, as “Middle Easterners.” We are, instead, a depressing variation of an “imagined community” still waiting to be invented. The name “Middle East” aside, there is no regional institution to give it tangible expression. Thus, we are an anomaly: an unregionalized, unrealized area—only an idea, a concept, a passport. There is hope for a larger environmental-socioeconomic-political framework whose time, tragically, has yet to come, and, indeed might never come.

Arguably the last time “the Near East” or “Middle East” possessed any degree of cohesiveness was in 1918. For the better part of four centuries, following the seizure of Constantinople in 1453, unity in the lands of the “Musselmen” (the term then applied dismissively to Muslims under Ottoman rule) was marked by a single allegiance to the Turkish *sultan-khalif*. But then, in the long aftermath of World War I, dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the inability of pan-Arab nationalism to substitute for the lost sense of unity produced a cluster of small, parochial, weak, and warring successor states.

310

FROM PARTISANSHIP TO PARTNERSHIP

Clearly, there are powerful forces and profound differences among Middle East countries that must be addressed in the pursuit of collective security and survival. These forces and differences stem in large part from the “spoilers”—the exclusivist theologies and extremist movements shaping current and future Middle Eastern affairs—and today’s power brokers, especially those with neither the vision nor the desire to see the formation of a pluralistic, tolerant, multi-national, and multi-ethnic regional coalition.

These self-serving elites and preachers of negativism who effectively block the emergence of any centripetal regional identity range from the wealthy oil-producing economic “haves” of the Persian Gulf to militant pan-Islamists. And there are certainly those for whom extending regional membership and legitimacy to a Jewish state—with or without a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian problem—is and will continue to be unthinkable. Whether indifferent to, wary of, or openly against constructive regionalization, they prefer the norms and conventions of the “old Middle East” order, which has stirred a cauldron of discontent—a region regarded internationally as a symbol of malignant hatred, religious intolerance, violence, political instability, and regional

divisiveness. Add to this the absence of other factors conducive to functional cooperation—including the common perception of a clear and present danger; of a charismatic, unifying leader, like Prussia in the case of German unification; of a powerful lobby; or of a large pro-integration constituency.¹¹

On the other hand, even in the face of these deterrents and shortcomings, collective action must be taken in the search for common ground precisely because so much is at stake.

In doing so however, great care must be taken in how a Middle Eastern identity can and should be promoted. Clearly, there is a wrong way and a right way to build regionalism’s architectural scaffolding. As suggested here, one right way limits the requirements to four essential preconditions. It must be indigenous, voluntary, inclusive, and functional.

Regionalism must be completely voluntary and indigenous—that is, of, by, and for Middle Easterners. Without our consent, none of the requisite reforms on more open intra-regional trade, joint tourism packages, environmental standards, and the like can be truly promoted from outside the region. Nor can they possibly gain voluntary, let alone enthusiastic, acceptance from Middle East insiders if forcibly imported. Jordan’s King Abdullah II best captures the proper spirit in setting forth his approach to a stable, liberalized, and prosperous Middle East when insisting that the process for change and growth be both “homegrown and inclusive.”¹²

311

Functionally, regionalization must also include learning protocols for cooperation and multilateralism; spreading confidence-building; and substituting bloc politics for blocking politics and urgency for complacency and self-conceit. Because basic intra-regional skills for communication, consultation, coordination, and coexistence have yet to be acquired, we must set our sights low—in fact, at ground zero. Certainly nothing on so grand a scale as “The New Middle East” outline—prematurely sketched by Shimon Peres in the heady days of the 1993 Oslo Accords, with its visionary call for open borders, regional planning, and economic integration—is realistic. Rather, modest and incremental measures are necessary that take into account the authentic needs of the region and its distinctive ethnic, cultural, and religious character—measures anchored not in altruism but in the calculus of each regional member country’s own needs and self-interest. Self-interest must be defined as non-zero sum, allowing for “win-win” outcomes achievable only through mutual accommodation.

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In other words, of greater importance than democratization or sweeping social reforms in the short-term, are emergency steps aimed at a more practical *minimum*

shared ground in the Middle East, so that the highest regional priority may require not the highest, but the lowest common denominator.

As proved by the post–World War II experience in Europe, the ability of neighboring countries with a long history of enmity to separate political from apolitical issues is one of the keys in the functionalist approach to gradual transnational, regionalist cooperation. Where the Middle East is concerned, prudence and pragmatism call for appealing to arguments of national self-interest rather than dismissing them. In this category are intergovernmental pilot projects aimed at crisis prevention and response; along with those directed toward arresting economic and environmental decline, and those that stand a real chance of producing short-term, tangible—possibly even dramatic—results.

Tackling water scarcity is asserted here as a prototype for functional regional cooperation under the banner of Middle Easternism. What makes it an ideal flagship project is the recognition that the threat is truly broad in scope, crosses national boundaries, and defies unilateral steps. It vitally affects all regional prospects. It poses the very real danger, if ignored, of Middle East water wars in the coming decade. Moreover, any number of ambitious, yet workable, solutions for improving water management, allocation, and development are already on the drawing boards; they only await consent by the directly concerned regional actors. There is, for example, the nearby precedent for partnership offered by the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), launched in 1999 with the participation of ten riparian states, counted among the world's poorest countries, sharing the Nile River. Political differences notwithstanding, these NBI members are committed to cooperatively developing the Nile basin's resources. If diverse countries like these are capable of banding together purposively, then surely those of us touching on the Jordan River and its northern sources are capable, with Turkey's help, of doing the same.

312

REGIONALISM'S TRACK RECORD

Once again, there is a wrong way and a right way to build regionalism's architectural scaffolding. Several proto-experiments loosely categorized as "regional" have provided some lessons about what to watch out for.

The Arab League, established in 1945, is a good example of a body that meets two of the four criteria—indigenous (albeit with Britain providing the original catalyst) and voluntary—but falls short on functional and concrete accomplishments and non-exclusivity. References in recent years to an "Arab order" or to an "Arab system" and calls for an Arab Common Market by 2015 suffer from the same liability of leaving out major non-Arab regional actors like Iran, Israel, and Turkey.

Although induced more from outside than generated from within, the Euro-

“Middle Easterner”: A Regionalism Denied

Mediterranean Partnership sponsored by the European Commission is a positive step in the right direction because of its efforts toward greater comprehensiveness. Its programs specifically seek to “complement and reinforce” bilateral projects. The Barcelona Process, created in 1995, tries to tackle issues having a transnational dimension by promoting closer integration between the 27 members (15 EU Member States and the 12 Mediterranean Partners).

Still uncertain is the fate of France’s *Union pour la Méditerranée* initiative. Launched in July 2008 and not to be confused with the partnership, the initiative would attempt to form a bridge between Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. This Mediterranean Union likewise would seek to emphasize the positive in setting forth four main goals: environment and sustainable development; inter-cultural dialogue; economic growth and social development; and plugging the security vacuum throughout the Mediterranean basin.

On the same order is the Middle East Regional Cooperation Program (MERC) administered by the United States Agency for International Development. Its goal is “to contribute to development and improvement of the quality of life” in the “Middle East Region” through the application of research and technology, with eligibility for funding explicitly stipulating that “only proposals developed jointly by Arab and Israeli institutions are accepted.”

Conversely, failing the four-fold test are European and U.S. initiatives that, in addition to being pressed upon Middle Easterners by outsiders, seek to avoid confrontation by explaining away the non-invitation and non-inclusion of Iran and Turkey, but especially of Israel. An instructive case is the Middle East Free Trade Initiative (MFTA) announced with considerable fanfare by President George W. Bush on 27 February 2003. Its stated goals are commendable, aimed at transforming the Middle East and bringing it into an expanding circle of opportunity. This transformation, it was thought, should involve graduated steps for Middle Eastern nations to increase robust trade and investment between the United States and others in the world economy. It can be achieved by joining those in the region determined to seek genuine progress toward greater democracy, tolerance, prosperity and freedom; by tearing down walls of prejudice, poverty and protectionism; by encouraging a region-wide commitment to open trade with the United States; and, equally important, by a pledge to free trade by the nations of the Middle East among themselves. Except, in the face of Arab political objections and suspension of the 1993 Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, this original policy has been revised, if not reversed.¹³

In the interim, bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) have been concluded by the

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United States with, respectively, Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman. Intended to be pursuant to the umbrella-like U.S.–Middle East MEFTA, given the hurdle of Israel's accession, instead these bilateral accords now risk becoming a convenient, albeit less expansive, substitute for the immeasurably more ambitious MEFTA partnership.

However, making due with a string of separate bilateral Free Trade Areas instead of with the region as a whole—even when spliced together to convey a false impression of jointness—does not constitute or inspire economic integration or even rudimentary interdependence. No less important is the fact that regionalism and regionalization in the Middle East simply cannot be bought at the price of any country's forced exclusion. To talk of a Middle East Free Trade Area as part of a “greater” and “broader” Middle East, while at the same time consenting to bar from membership any country which might otherwise wish to participate would be contradictory and self-defeating.


That a community of interests might yet be formed before it becomes too late is slightly encouraged by another earlier, positive experiment at intra-regionalism under the 1991 Madrid process. Inaugurated in tandem with negotiation of outstanding political issues, this formula succeeded in establishing a multilateral track wherein Israel, regional Arab states, and other states outside the region met together over the course of a number of months to address each of five key functional issues of common and immediate concern: water, environment, arms control, refugees, and economic development. Before being permanently suspended due to derailment of the Arab-Israeli peace process itself, these collaborative workshops did register a number of inroads in bringing political adversaries together around a shared table in serious dialogue—no small feat, and proof for the functionalist approach. One proposal for committing to a fresh, concerted, and earnest start toward genuine Middle Easternism would be to reconvene these suspended workshops as quickly as possible.

Time is precisely one luxury and one commodity Middle Easterners unfortunately do not possess. First, other regions and sub-regions in Europe, North America, South America, and Asia are pursuing incremental engagement toward each other, with commendable levels of success at functional cooperation, multilateralism, interdependence, integration, and enlargement, whereas in the Middle East, our policies still remain rooted in post-1919 unilateralism. Larger trends, like globalization in all of its various manifestations, are perhaps the greatest and most immediate test of our adaptability. Yet, we continue to do nothing as the world changes around us. A second reason that we cannot afford to wait is that many of the region's political conflicts are so deep-seated, complex, and intractable that they necessitate great diplomatic patience and ingenuity, and, in some cases, a maturation process until the situation is “ripe” for solving. Consequently, basic logic dictates a commitment to tackling our shared environmental agenda neither *before* nor *after* conflict resolution but *simultaneously* with earnest efforts at reducing political tensions.

FANTASY OR IMPERATIVE?

Modern Middle East history serves as the best reminder that an opportunity dismissed need not be the one and only opportunity. But it is an opportunity missed forever. Without immediate steps toward elementary Middle Easternism, we are together facing a disaster on the scale of 1498.

Yet even at this late hour, a “Middle East” is sustainable. We still retain—but not indefinitely—both the human and the physical resources necessary to surmount ecological and environmental adversities and to be competitive globally. Therefore, any failure to avert marginalization and stagnation yet again in the history of our region can only be a folly of monumental proportions.

Should the concept of “Middle Easterner” continue to symbolize nothing more than an imagined community, our shared responsibility for not acting timely in concert shall ultimately serve as definitive proof of what we, today, stubbornly refuse to acknowledge: our basic commonality, our regional oneness, and our shared destiny. 

NOTES

1. *The Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*, United Nations Development Programme (New York: UNDP, 2003).

2. *The Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World*, United Nations Development Programme (New York: UNDP, 2005), p. 19.

3. *The Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*, United Nations Development Programme (New York: UNDP, 2006), 24.

4. *SIPRI Yearbook 2007: Armament, Disarmament and International Security*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2007), 295.

5. On Turkey’s potential leadership role in spurring transboundary water redistribution and water sharing on the grand scale of the “Peace Pipeline Project,” see: Mithat Rende, “Water Transfer From Turkey to Water-Stressed Countries in the Middle East,” www.ipcri.org/watconf/papers/mithat.pdf. Other constructive ideas for answering the water needs of Middle Easterners are discussed in: Masahiro Murakami, *Managing Water for Peace in the Middle East: Alternative Strategies* (New York: United Nations University Press, 1995); Nurit Kliot, *Water Resources and Conflict in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1994); and The Middle East Institute, “Water and Conflict in the Middle East,” *Viewpoints 7* (June 2008), www.mideasti.org.

6. Figures quoted in Avi Issacharoff and Asaf Uni, “World powers urge Arabs to honor pledges to Palestinians,” *Ha’aretz*, 2 May 2008.

7. The appeal was repeated at a meeting of the Middle East Quartet in Berlin on 24 June 2008, in an official statement released at the close of the meeting, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw>.

8. Cited in *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, May 2008), 8.

9. Kevin Watkins, et al., *Human Development Report 2007/2008* (New York: UNDP, 2008), <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics>.

10. El Hassan Bin Talal, “Middle East Integration,” *Taipei Times*, 30 March 2005. President of the Club of Rome, Moderator of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, and the President of the Arab Thought Forum, El Hassan bin Talal published his views on this topic as an op-ed piece. See the article on the website of Project Syndicate, an association of newspapers around the world: <http://www.project-syndicate.org>.

AHARON KLIEMAN

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11. David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966). An excellent primer on the logic and dynamics of functionalism is this neglected 1943 pioneering treatise on modern integrative theory by David Mitrany republished in 1966.

12. King Abdullah II, "The Road to Reform," *Foreign Policy* 145 (November-December 2004), 72-3.

13. Emblematic, in December, 1998, Menabank (The Middle East Development Bank), meant to be a proud pillar of grand regional cooperation projects, closed its doors, too, and suspended operations.

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