

Opinion

Editorial

Fighting despair is key to peace and stability in the Arab world

According to a recent survey by the International Organisation for Migration, 80% of Iraqi migrants to Germany reported the primary factor that drove them to leave their homes was their belief there was “no hope in the future”.

In much of the Arab world, loss of hope is a reflection of failure by politicians to inspire confidence. Many are perceived to be more interested in jockeying for power and influence than working for the common good.

This has often fuelled a demobilising apathy towards political life. For decades after independence, Arab youth were promised a better future. Despite their leaders’ pledges, good jobs and a better quality of life have not materialised. The rampant suspicion of widespread corruption and the cynicism it created further undermined the credibility of politicians.

Such cynicism towards the political class can provoke unrest among frustrated segments of the population.

The more serious danger, however, is that diminished hopes can lead to doubts about the possibility of peaceful political change. In too many instances, that kind of attitude has paved the way for violence and extremism.

Also, thousands of despairing young Arabs have risked their lives in pursuit of greener pastures outside their countries’ borders. For years, and especially in recent months, they have crossed the Mediterranean and the Aegean seas by the thousands.

Confronted with disappointing realities upon arrival in Europe, many are returning home.

The misleading narrative of greater reward in the hereafter has encouraged small numbers of confused and fragile young minds to seek the path of violent jihad.

The gaping void created by families as they increasingly disappear from the lives of their children under the pressure of modern social transformations has deprived younger generations of Arabs of a crucial support system that used to provide them with more confidence for the future.

Social media, smartphones and almost universal access to the internet have created more opportunities. They have also bred more frustration among young people who have greater awareness of their personal shortcomings and the limits of their own environments.

This vicious circle will be hard to break but there are possibilities other than despair and self-destruction.

A 2016 University of Maryland survey of Tunisian public opinion indicated that 78% of the population in this small North African country said the “most important obligation for Tunisians” was to “excel in science and technology”.

Only 1% of respondents said the overriding obligation should be to “travel to Muslim countries to fight enemies of Islam”. This runs against the reductive and misleading perception that Tunisia is principally the top breeding ground for jihadism in the Middle East and North Africa.

It also shows there can be light at the end of the tunnel in the region.

Despite all the manifestations of catastrophic failure surrounding them, young people in the Arab world still have dreams and they want to pursue these dreams in their home countries. It is time that local leaders – assisted by the international community – give them a better chance to break the cycle of despair and offer them a realistic vision of a better future on this Earth, not in the hereafter.

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It is time for reason to prevail in Yemen



Abdulmajid al-Jalal

The Yemen peace talks in Kuwait are the third negotiations among the warring parties since the start of the conflict. The first talks were in June 2015 and the second last December.

After a full year of vicious fighting, both sides in the conflict seem to be exhausted and find themselves in politically and militarily difficult situations. The legitimate Yemeni government is facing serious security challenges in the southern regions made worse by the presence of Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda factions. Pressure is building following calls for a north-south partition.

To make things worse, the military reality is moving towards a stalemate and the adoption of an “attack-and-retreat” strategy. According to political and military analysts, government forces have failed to build on their victories in Taiz and Naham. On the other side, the Houthis and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh are getting aid and protection from foreign powers, which renders defeating them virtually impossible.

Given these realities, the battle for Sana’a, the capital, has become more complex and more difficult to settle.

The Houthis and Saleh sympathisers have lost a great deal of their political and military bite. The pro-legitimate government Arab alliance forces led by Saudi Arabia have regained control of almost 70% of Yemeni territory. Rebel forces, however, are capable and skilled enough to make the fight difficult for government forces, in addition to controlling certain strategic zones.

These relative failures from both sides might push belligerents to stop hiding behind appearances of flexibility and come to grips with the practical necessities of a real political settlement in accordance

with UN Resolution 2216 and the frame of reference established by the National Dialogue and the Gulf Initiative.

There will be no escape from having to make concessions, no matter how painful they might be. Anything less than that will not do or the conflict will go on and increase in intensity and violence.

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed set a

five-point agenda for a political settlement. At the top is the necessity for the Houthis and Saleh factions to withdraw from Sana’a and all other cities and to surrender their heavy weapons. Then comes the need for the legitimate government in Yemen to regain control of state institutions and take the proper security measures, the need to settle the issue of political prisoners, abducted people and prisoners of war and, finally, the need to negotiate the procedures for a political transition.

The real problem, however, lies in the appropriate mechanisms for executing the points. The legitimate Yemeni government insists on implementing them in the order they were given. In other words, the Houthi and Saleh factions must first withdraw, surrender their weapons and turn over the cities and government institutions under their control, and then there may be negotiations about political transition.

“After a full year of vicious fighting, both sides in the conflict seem to be exhausted.”

Of course, the Houthis and Saleh’s camp see things differently. They insist on discussing the political transition and forming a national unity government first.

Perhaps discussing the political transition process first might lead to agreeing about forming a national unity government headed by a Yemeni figure acceptable to all parties in the conflict.

As a first step, it is likely to result in breaking down the distrust barrier, reducing hateful discourse and preparing the right conditions for moving forward with the political process.

All of this, of course, must be carried out under UN, international and regional oversight. This international cover is intended to keep the momentum of the process going, monitor its details and even penalise those who deviate from its frame of reference or break its rules.

Whatever the details of the final outcome might be, the Kuwait talks must necessarily lead to the end of hostilities and the preservation of a unified Yemen through a political consensus.

Abdulmajid al-Jalal is a Saudi writer.

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