

## **THE ATTRACTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF FEDERALISM FOR THE MIDDLE EAST**

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As the Middle East continues to unravel along ethno-sectarian and tribal lines creative federal solutions for the resulting mess have come increasingly under consideration. The primordial communal aggregates of the heterogeneous region have resurfaced with a vengeance necessitating new formulations for future peaceful coexistence among them after the dust has settled. As a consequence, this might signify that the heyday of the unitary state structure as it has prevailed over decades in places like Syria and Iraq under the Baath is now behind us. Logically, federal arrangements applied to composite societies offer optimal chances for accommodating diversity within a unified state entity, while simultaneously safeguarding the distinctiveness and autonomy of the various communal components constituting the existing pluralism. Some of the most successful countries around the world happen to be federally structured: Switzerland, Canada, the United States, Germany, others.

The attractiveness of the federal formula is that it is sufficiently malleable to be tailored to fit almost any set of disparate givens on the ground: linguistic groups, ethnic communities, religious sects—the list is long and varied. And geography meaning areas of similar demographic concentrations need not be the determining factor in every case; the urge to consolidate like collectives together territorially can be offset by resorting to a variety of legal, constitutional, and local arrangements that would keep people in place while safeguarding their rights as individuals and their distinctive identities as groups. Federalism also works for mixed areas and not only for homogeneous ones.

One of the stubborn problems facing the Middle East today is that federalism on both the popular and leadership levels remains a misunderstood and unfairly maligned concept; it is usually equated erroneously with partition or fragmentation and dismissed accordingly. Therefore one of the prerequisites for the viability of the federal option is education about the true meaning of the concept. The beauty of the federal path is that it liberates communities from the tyranny of numbers and the fluctuations of demography by guaranteeing the rights of every community regardless of its expanding or shrinking size, and preserves its autonomy while allowing it to share power with other communities proportionally.

In the specific contexts of Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, for example—all of them divided societies along ethno-sectarian lines—we see a number of distinct communities where peaceful coexistence among them would require legally and constitutionally guaranteed levels of security, freedom, and trust for each that only their interaction under a federal umbrella can impart.

Whether it is Alawites, Christians, Sunnis, Druze, and Kurds (Syria), or Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, Yazidis, Sabaeans, and Kurds (Iraq), or the 18 constitutionally recognized religious sects of Lebanon—each diversified grouping within each of these countries can be federally arranged to maximize among its components the three needed elements for success: security, freedom, and mutual trust. Wherever there are mixed areas within these countries the Swedish concept of the Ombudsman, for instance, can be applied to provide an additional layer of protection for minorities embedded within other minority communities—say Sunnis living in predominantly Alawite areas of coastal Syria; Christians living in predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Iraq; or Shiites living in the predominantly Christian area of Byblos in central Lebanon.

Federalism is neither a panacea, nor is it a problem-free political prescription; it represents a viable road-map towards a transition from unstable heterogeneity towards workable pluralism. Lest the application of federalism in parts of the Middle East be made to sound easy or automatic once sufficient enlightenment about the concept has been achieved the obstacles facing such a straightforward application need to be spelled out up front. The good news is that none of these challenges is insurmountable as a set given. To work federalism has to be arrived at bottom-up and not imposed top-down. This means the various components—in this case the ethno-religious communities—destined to comprise the federal arrangement should all be agreed that adoption of the federal route towards peaceful and prosperous coexistence is indeed what they want. A modicum of regional and international shepherding would thus be needed here over and above the concurrence around the federal concept by the various aggregates.

Clearly, Sunni-Shiite tensions fuelled by the ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran would have to simmer down as would the softening of Turkey's fixation on resisting Kurdish autonomy for such shepherding to materialize. To avoid the inadvertent creation of Sunni rump states that could be hijacked away from Sunni moderates by violent radical jihadists every effort must be made to bolster the hold of the Sunni moderates on Sunni-majority areas. At the same time in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the Sunni world, constituting the majority of Muslims globally, should begin to accept to be weaned away from a centuries-old streak of dominance over others, and not towards the fake form of demeaning tolerance known as dhimmitude, but in the direction of a genuine embrace of the different other as an equal partner in society enjoying basic rights and inherent freedoms that demand sincere respect. The absence of a rooted democratic culture in the Middle East is another drawback that will hamper federalism; however, the federal trajectory itself offers the fastest way to begin to instill the rudiments of such a culture in the assorted and freedom-starved Middle Eastern environment.

Federalism may be slow and daunting work, but on balance its attractions do outweigh its limitations as the most suitable future political solution for many sub-regions of the Middle East. Indeed basic logic, political theory, internal composition, and empirical experience from beyond the Middle East would seem to lead us to this assertion.