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The Strategic Environment in the Middle East: A Shattered Regional Order

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The kaleidoscopic changes in the Middle East from the Levant to the Gulf reveal a region in the midst of a comprehensive upheaval. Neither the length of the transition nor the outcome of this transformation is predictable. What is clear is that for all the continuities in culture, religion, and language, the region is in an unprecedentedly fluid state. On every level, state, regional politics, and geopolitical context, the Middle East today bears little resemblance to the region before 2003. On the centenary of Sykes–Picot, little is left of that colonial construct.

In Robert Cooper's typology, the Middle East has been sliding backward from the "modern" to the "pre-modern" world; from that of the territorial nation-state with borders, sovereignty, nationalism, and governmental capacity to a world of more local affiliations and competing elements of tribal or clan loyalties, armed groups, and little governmental capacity.[1] People have begun to shift their loyalties back to more "compact communities." In Max Weber's terms, few Middle East states now enjoy the prime attribute of the state: the legitimate monopoly of the means of violence.

Today, regional actors – still principally states – are under siege in every state, even the most resilient ones. Society is divided as to the role of Islam in politics. Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen are in conditions of actual or virtual civil war. Non-state actors have moved into the vacuums: Hizbollah, Badr brigades, Daesh, Jabhat al Nusra, and the PKK to mention a few. The civil wars have created massive refugee

flows and domestic tensions, changing the face of the Middle East and putting immense pressure on vulnerable states like Jordan and the always-fragile Lebanon. The current regional order is under threat as some of these states unravel anarchically. Jihadi groups have now become territorial-based and compete with states. Welcome to the "Afghan model."

Regional politics since 2003 (including the toppling of a Sunni regime in Iraq by outside forces) are characterized by a heightened sectarian polarization between the Sunni and Shia camps, which are now engaged in proxy wars in Syria and Yemen and less overtly in Iraq and Lebanon. This rivalry, which in fact reflects a power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, could lead to direct conflict and has taken on a zero-sum character that impedes any settlement of the bloody conflicts in Syria or Yemen. There is a risk that states which have little interest in this bilateral feud, like Egypt or Turkey or even Pakistan will become involved. Regional alignments are in flux as Israel grows closer to the more activist GCC and Turkey mends its fences with Israel due to Russian pressure. Because of this rivalry and differing priorities (for Egypt, terrorism and the Muslim brotherhood; for Turkey, the PKK), there is little hope for a common front regionally against Daesh.

Weak, fragile, and broken states are under challenge from non-state actors raising the question whether the current state-based regional order in the Middle East will survive, and if so, in what form. With the Kurds very prominent in the fight against Daesh and as the most successful group in post-Saddam Iraq, the question is pertinent.[2] Even the stronger states Egypt, Turkey, and Iran, more homogeneous and historic states with a strong cultural identity, remain deficient in governance, and one can witness the continuation of "deep states" in all of them. As discussed later, none of the states has satisfactorily answered the question of the appropriate role of Islam in politics (Israel has an analogous problem).[3]

Geopolitically, the changes marked as unipolarity have given way to non-polarity. Having hubristically overshot in the earlier period, the US is now recalibrating its involvement in the region. It is now closer to being an "offshore balancer" than a "regional power" that it seemed to be in the period 2001-2009. This change reflects a political reluctance to get involved as much as a pivot to Asia or diminished interest in the region due to the availability of shale oil. The net result is that, in a period of turmoil, the regional states do not have the alibi of an external power taking a leading role. Russia's return to the region complicates calculations too: is it playing a "spoiler role" vis-a-vis the West, or showing a genuine tilt toward the Shia? In the meantime, the precipitous decline in oil prices (from $100 to $30 in three years) at once exacerbates regional rivalry and puts the states under pressure domestically.

Without external help and little sign of regional cooperation amidst the real prospect of further conflict leading to more displacement, refugees and population movements, the region looks set to pose a continuing problem for the external power most directly concerned – the EU. How did we get to this condition of an entire region in sustained turmoil? To understand the current situation, we need to look back to what preceded it and the roots of the multiple crises besetting the region. For purposes of space/economy and for maximum contrast, I will do this by focusing on a few selected themes of continuing importance in 2016: governance; the political role of Islam; regional politics; terrorism; the evolution of war; and international politics and the role of external powers.

Looking at the region since 1945, one is struck by two turning points: 1979 and, a decade later, the end of the Cold War. The former was much more important for the region's politics than the latter. A principal theme of this paper is the degree to which regional politics have been the product of local dynamics and forces and the marginal impact of outside powers, even in the Cold War and the decade of unipolarity following it.

Governance: The Linchpin of Stability

Almost all the woes of the region, and the principal challenges facing it, stem from the failure to devise functioning and legitimate political systems. This implies systems that are accountable, representative, and inclusive, with a capacity to deliver basic services.

In the 1950s, following decolonization, military regimes took over and used the Cold War to gain arms and training. They instituted one-party systems and used foreign policy to keep their citizens mobilized. They gave privileges to special groups and mistreated minorities. Military-led coups d'etat prevented the development of civil societies and denied the people a say in political decisions. Later, this morphed into the security (mukhabarat) state, e.g., Libya, Iraq and Syria, with more stable leadership favoring their own clans and treating the state's resources as ghanima. These security states were less military but equally repressive and politically dysfunctional. These were largely secular, ostensibly nationalist states using the Palestine issue for outmaneuvering regional rivals and maintaining states of emergencies. The left and the religious oppositions were kept at bay through repression.

The "return" of Islam after 1979 found these states unprepared. They were the principal casualties of the Arab Spring with its demand for respect, accountability, and effective government. The failure of Arab leaders to devise governments that

took into account their citizens' needs and wishes left a legacy which is now clearly visible: societies polarized on the proper role of Islam in society; a discrediting of the secular nationalist model; and unemployment in a largely youthful population which looks to migrate abroad. Divisions among the opposition and weakened states have opened up space for militant armed groups, mainly Islamists, to enter the political arena, often with foreign backing. The result varies from civil wars (Syria, Yemen and Iraq) to frozen stalemated, polarized politics in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. The place of Islam in politics and what is an "Islamic model'" are issues that were first raised in 1979 and which persist today.

The Place of Islam in Politics

The Islamic revolution in Iran is the single most important event in postwar Middle East politics. Islam was thrust into politics throughout the region and few states escaped its consequences, which are still reverberating today. Islam has pervaded the region, affecting regional relationships, the nature of terrorism today, the banner and slogan of the "resistance" against Israel, conceptions of legitimacy, and the nature of opponents of the existing regimes. From Saudi Arabia in 1979, Egypt in 1981, Syria in 1982 to Algeria in 1990, Islamists stormed the political barricades. Governments torn between repression and cooptation had to balance the risks of driving them into more militancy and underground or risk them capturing the state. Iraq, Libya, and even Syria – ¬once threatened – adopted, with little success, a defensive Islamization to shore up their systems. From Saddam to Sisi, regimes have sought to polish their Islamic credentials.

In alternating between coopting and confronting their Islamic oppositions with mixed results, governments failed to deal with one source of their popularity. The basic services that the governments failed to provide were increasingly energetically provided by Islamist groups, which also dealt with problems caused by natural disasters as well as food, housing, and medical shortages.[4]

The discussion on the place of Islam in politics and the role of the Sharia (central or marginal?) also raised issues about secular laws: who was its authoritative interpreter, the role of government, and the legitimacy of the state itself. The slogan of Islamists in opposition to the state, "Islam is the solution" has not been vindicated as countries like Iran can hardly be held up as a model. Yet even avowedly secular states like Turkey have found it necessary for their identity to tilt back and rebalance culturally towards Islam.

As the secular, nationalist model of the security states singularly failed to deliver effective services to the citizenry, the search for alternatives fixed on what was

familiar and authentic in language and symbol and which had been repressed – not democracy but Islam in all its vague and variegated meanings.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring (which the Iranians hopefully refer to as the "Islamic awakening"), societies in the region have demonstrated a continuing fundamental cleavage on the question of secularism vs Islamic (or religious) political systems. This is as true of Israel and Turkey as it is of Iran and Egypt. Injecting religion into political disputes such as the Palestine question made their resolution through compromise more difficult, and both Israel and the Palestinians did so after 1979. Opportunist groups like Daesh have sought to exploit these schisms and claimed to represent a modern caliphate, in the process underscoring the worst aspects of the region's politics by imitating the existing states in their predatory, arbitrary, and repressive behavior. In the case of ISIS, violence against minorities is matched by its sectarian agenda, hardly an original or tempting model. At the same time, there is no such thing as an enlightened pluralist Islamic model elsewhere. The Asian states (South and East) have regressed in recent years, providing jihadists and the target for Daesh. Saudi Arabia has often promoted the growth of Sunni extremism, not least because of its rivalry with Shi'i Iran. The net result of this has been the "mainstreaming" of Salafism in Islam from what used to be a narrow and very local base.

Regional Politics: from Palestine and the Arab Cold War to Sectarian Polarization

The postwar period of decolonization saw a focus on the Palestine issue as an Arab cause. This assumed centrality in regional politics even as the struggle for supremacy in the Arab world was played out in slogans of Arab nationalism in the "Arab Cold War." Unity schemes came and went, interventions took place (Yemen, Kuwait) punctuated by wars with Israel, intended and unintended (1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973). Iran and the Arabian Peninsula states were marginal players in all of this, though they were the object of Gamal Abd al-Nasser's wrath and campaign against monarchies.

This began to change in the 1970s with the demise of Nasser and the growth of oil wealth. By the end of the decade, the Iranian revolution had created a new challenge: a large non-Arab Shia state in close proximity professing republican ideals, seeking Muslim leadership, accusing Saudi Arabia of "American Islam" and casting itself as the real source of "resistance" versus Israel. The sectarian origins of current problems in the region started with Iran's open support for Iraqi Shia, its instigation of a coup attempt in Bahrain, and assassination attempt in Kuwait (1981/2) together

with the beginning of a sustained involvement in Lebanon in 1982. Iran was now a major player in the Arab–Israel zone, with Syria its sole Arab ally in its eight year war (1980-88) with Iraq. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Iran–Saudi rivalry was largely indirect with the support of proxies on one side and on the other, cheque-book diplomacy underwriting madrassas and mosques, promoting the Saudi brand of Islam throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. National rivalry given Islamic and sectarian expression saw increased cases of attacks on Shia in some of the countries mentioned. Iran did not see sectarianism as a winning card and tried to promote itself as a Muslim not Shi'ite leader.[5] From necessity though, as a self-proclaimed defender of the "oppressed," it gravitated towards its natural constituency. Professing Muslim unity, Iran practiced division.

In the course of the next decade, the region's center of gravity shifted to the newly wealthy and unstable Gulf. The 1979 agreement between Israel and Egypt took the most important Arab state out of the picture rendering what had been the Arab-Israeli dispute once again, principally, into a Palestine-Israeli dispute. Two intifidahs –1987 and 2000 – testified to this, as did the absence of reference to the dispute in the subsequent Arab Spring. The upshot of all this was the linking of the Arab-Israel and Arabian Gulf zones into one strategic theater, with the Gulf States and Iran playing more important roles, and as the period after 2010 demonstrated, with the GCC and especially Saudi Arabia taking the lead in terms of a more assertive (some said "impulsive") role region-wide.

The US removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 ushered in a new era in the region. Iran sought to establish a new strategic buffer in a newly Shi'i Iraq, while Saudi Arabia saw the creation of a new Shi'i state as a direct threat to the region. This same perspective animated the Saudi view of politics in the region in Bahrain (2011) and later in Syria where Iranian support for the status quo (Assad) was seen as deeply destabilizing and dangerous to the Sunni world. As the sectarian perspective on regional politics took hold, the scope of the Iran-Saudi rivalry widened and intensified assuming an inflexible character in which neither side could be the first to flinch or compromise. Yemen where the two states had cooperated in the era of the Shah and Nasser, now saw them on opposite sides. The rivalry extended to OPEC where Saudi determination to keep market share helped drive prices lower. Saudi Arabia acted more assertively regionally and sought to organize a coalition against Iran (including Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt) underlining its interest in "internationalizing" the rivalry. However, it bumped into the reality that the region was only apparently polarized, that there are cross-cutting interests and affiliations at play. The Sunni world is no more represented by Saudi Arabia than the Shi'is by

Iran. Differences within each community, as well as the existence of secularists and nationalists, suggest other affiliations, possibly stronger than the merely or exclusively sectarian.

In addition, the structure of the region with several large states must give any state aspiring to hegemony, pause. Turkey, Egypt, or Iran – the most plausible candidates (with Israel and Saudi Arabia not far behind) – would quickly find the others arrayed against them. Two other points need to be made about the evolution of regional politics. The regional states in the Arab-Israel zone and the Gulf have demonstrated little capacity to manage their own affairs, let alone conflicts. There is no record of peacemaking or farsighted diplomacy regionally. These states have become addicted to external interventions to save them. Related to this is the fact that the regional states since 1945 have not – in the main – had the experience of major war among themselves. Where wars have occurred they have cleared up misunderstandings and pretensions: most Arab states now recognize that there is no military solution to the Palestine issue. Among the Gulf Arabs and with Iran there has been no comparable experience or learning process (with the exception of Iraq vis-a-vis Iran). Hence, the Saudis and Iranians do not agree on the power hierarchy (or pecking order), and so far have not tested it directly. Wars clear up these things but they are today a less and less acceptable way of doing so. So the two states, and especially the Saudis, continue to harbor fantasies about their relative status and power. A large part of the blame for this must accrue to the West led by the US. Saudi Arabia has been given special treatment and consideration to which it has become accustomed.[6] As with Israel, the US' indulgence of Saudi Arabia has been counter-productive. In both cases these states have been able to avoid dealing with regional realities constructively. In this sense, US coddling has distorted regional relations for the worse.

External Powers: Complicating Factor or Solution?

In the immediate postwar decolonization period, the US and USSR appeared as new actors in the region. Although they saw the world in terms of their bipolar competition, the regional states saw the world through their own priorities. The superpowers saw the clash of arms between their protégés as bearing on their credibility and linked to the global rivalry of the two blocs. This led to the ever-present risk of local wars escalating to a nuclear confrontation, and nuclear threats were indeed made in 1956 and 1973. Yet the striking thing in retrospect, at least, is how little influence the superpower patrons had despite their arms deliveries and alliances. Time and again, they were defied by their weak allies – such as in the case of the nationalization of oil and the Suez Canal, and the oil embargos; interventions (Nasser in Yemen and Israel

in Lebanon); the initiation of conflicts by Israel in 1967 and 1982 (against the PLO in Beirut) and Egypt in 1973. The regional states refused to accept the term insisted upon by the superpowers. Israel for example resisted any compromise on settlements insisting on payment for even considering it. In fact, Israel insisted on payment for every step on any 'peace process; and on conditions/payment for even discussing its nuclear program. The US, even at the height of power in its decade of uncontested hegemony and unipolarity (1990-2000), was unable to bring the parties together to make peace. Far from significantly influencing or controlling regional politics, the superpowers reacted to events, often with incomprehension.

One feature of this period was the superpower tendency to defer to their "strong men" ("our son of a bitch") as easier to do business with. This had the effect of reinforcing the authoritarian tendencies of local rulers. Unforgivable ignorance on the part of external powers also caused long-term damage to the region, e.g., the US in Iraq in 2002-2004. Worse than "regime change" was the single-minded focus on the sectarian nature of the country, a self-fulfilling assumption which ensured the sectarian fissure would become permanent.

The longstanding British presence kept the Gulf region at peace until their withdrawal in 1971. The US decision to rely on regional powers to maintain order ("twin pillars" policy) while maintaining a presence over the horizon was short-lived: the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war ended it. By 1990, in light of Iraq's attack against Kuwait, the US decided to create a permanent presence in the region, a naval component of which became the Fifth Fleet and control of which came under a new Central Command. "Dual containment" ended the US offshore presence and made it a regional player with some 30,000 troops in the region. Coinciding with the decade of unipolarity, the US decision was not contested. It led in time to US overconfidence and over-reach from containment to regime change in Iraq, with its attendant repercussions. The attack on Iraq and the stalemate that followed it also ushered in the end of the era of unipolarity. Russia's return and China's entry to the Middle East gives local states an apparent point of leverage vis-a-vis the US. It is its rivalry with the US that mainly animates Russia in the region, not some intrinsic strategic imperative in Syria.[7]

These events form the roots of the current era and have lessons for us.

1) Even in the Cold War period, US/USSR influence was limited and at the mercy of regional events. It was regional dynamics that shaped the Middle East not the global structure. This is still true as can be seen from the local origins of the Arab Spring and the origins of Iran-Saudi rivalry.

2) The regional players left to themselves were not able to perform much better. The "twin pillars" policy collapsed as a result of the Iranian revolution. The Iran-Iraq war stemmed from local issues and the role of the superpowers even if they had wanted otherwise would still have remained marginal.

3) The priorities and interests of the regional and external powers are rarely identical though they may overlap at times. Consider Israel and the US over the past fifty years. Or Saudi Arabia and the US today: Riyadh is focused on Iran and Washington on Daesh.

While regional factors and dynamics animate events, the influence of external powers is limited and the record of regional conflict management is not very reassuring.

War: From Conventional to Civil

One of the reasons for the decline in external power influence is found in the politics of the region. As inter-state conventional war declined – and with it the threat of major warfare – the utility of arms and arms supplies receded as well. Of course, arms relationships remain important as both Iran and Iraq would attest from bitter experience. The relationship between the US and Israel, which includes guaranteeing that state's "qualitative edge" militarily, is a prerequisite for reassuring Israel and hence getting it to even consider concessions.

That said, as the threat of a major war with an Arab coalition has faded along with any existential threat to Israel, the leverage of US arms has been reduced. Put another way, as "strategic depth" has been shrunk by missiles, territory has become less important and anti-missile technology more important. As a result, arms supplies still remain important for the GCC and Israel despite the changing face of war in the region. Indeed, hi-tech arms like anti-missile systems make some arms sales more important.

There have been no major wars in the Arab-Israel zone since 1973. The wars that have occurred since, such as the intifidahs and the wars in Lebanon and Gaza, have been relatively limited affairs. Israel has found it hard to translate its formidable military machine into decisive results: repeated "mowing of the grass" reflects the elusiveness of definitive victory. Hybrid or asymmetric wars have replaced conventional wars, reducing the importance of many components of conventional capability. Foes inferior conventionally can block access to key areas by practicing area denial strategies. Hizbollah in Lebanon in 2006 and the Iraqi insurgency amply demonstrated this. The current civil war and operations against Daesh confirm it.

On-the-ground intelligence, drone strikes, and special ops actions can "degrade" the foe but can they produce desired outcomes? US commentators today talk of "shaping the environment" a very different proposition from that expected from "shock and awe."

Military power remains of limited utility where the issues are principally those of nation-building, governance, and political legitimacy. This has been amply demonstrated in both Iraq and Afghanistan, where deficiencies in political systems have made insurgencies and extremism possible and long-lived.

The GCC states, and especially Saudi Arabia, over the years have spent hundreds of billions of dollars on arms. The stalemate in Yemen suggests limited yields from this investment.[8] The defense relationships with the US, UK, and France are a form of reassurance and a bond to the military-industrial complex in these countries. Yet, as President Obama has noted, the major threat these countries face is internal.[9]

Civil wars are the most cruel and most resistant to settlement absent a clear victor. The phenomenon of "too weak, too strong" prevails, in which the parties are too weak to win and too strong to lose, thus ensuring as in Syria continued mayhem, dislocation, and death. Changing facts on the battlefield (as the Russians are doing) may increase one party's bargaining power but does little to settle the differences.

Terrorism: in whose Name?

Until 1979, terrorism in the Middle East was secular, nationalist, and in the service of political/territorial goals. The various terrorist groups after decolonization were Palestinian and often funded by governments. Some groups were used as proxies against other Arab governments, but they were largely used against Israel. The injection of Islam into the politics of the region, and into the resistance against Israel, changed this. In 1982/3, the first cases of suicide bombings occurred against Israeli and US/French targets in Lebanon. At the same time, the mujahedin in Afghanistan welcomed volunteers for jihad against the USSR. Many of these became (in Olivier Roy's phrase) "nomadic jihadis" in the 1990s flitting from one cause to another: Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq.

The first generation jihadis represented by Al Qaeda, finding fertile ground everywhere in its local franchises, primarily concentrated on foreign targets (far enemy) not Muslim ones. Though violent, there was more symbolism than bloodlust in their operations. The 1980s saw "state-sponsored" terrorism or low-level violence being used by states as a form of indirect, non-attributable warfare against their adversaries. Iran was prominent in this field but more or less relinquished it over the

years. The same cannot be said of Pakistan which has continued this sponsorship even in the era of violent, disruptive jihadis with their own programs.[10]

The Sunni uprising against Baghdad and the US provided the recruits for the next generation of jihadis, first under Zarqawi and later under Baghdadi, as it morphed into Daesh. This group in competition with Al Qaeda (and on a different plane, Hamas in Gaza) targeted both the near and far enemies, was utterly ruthless and used the violence of the deed and the social media to maximum effect. It was also relentlessly brutal toward other Muslims and avowedly sectarian. The fact that governments had broken down made it easier to pursue its other distinguishing characteristic: its goal of setting up a caliphate in total disregard of existing state borders. In this, it represented more an insurgency, seizing territory rather than merely seeking to weaken its foes.

Foreign jihadis, many from Europe, flocked to its banner, less, it should be emphasized, due to any "Islamic message" but rather to its brazen extremism and radicalism. As Roy, Farhad, Khosrowkavar and others have noted, the radicalization of these recruits, sometimes converts, preceded their Islamization. Once radicalized, Daesh's brand of extremism appealed as the "only game in town." Governments concerned about their citizens returning radicalized from Syria should focus on why they were radicalized enough to go to Syria;[11] bombing Daesh is good theater but does not address the underlying problem.

The temptation to use terrorists for state ends persists though the advent of Daesh and underlines the threat they pose to states and the state system. Saudi Arabia sees Daesh as a greater threat to its sworn foe - Iran - than to itself. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia, which can be outflanked by Daesh as a radical Sunni movement, knows that the group is a potential competitor.[12] With both Daesh and Al Qaeda present on the Arabian peninsula, whatever threat Iran poses (and it is not a military one) pales into insignificance.[13]

Summary

The security state has been replaced by the contested state ("moustaches by beards"), top-down by bottom-up. The failure to create viable, legitimate, and effective states is the cause of the present turmoil and the single most important challenge facing the region. The Arab Spring represents the political awakening of the citizenry and their demands – though inchoate – represent a new step in the region's political evolution. In future, "the street" will be heard. The place of Islam in politics is salient in every state, is disputed, and is critical for any prospective national unity government.

Regional politics neither bound by the Cold War nor the Arab Cold War, nor centered on the Arab-Israeli dispute, now feature several cross-currents: sectarian rivalries; power struggles between states (Iran/Saudi) and their attendant proxy wars; low key inter-Arab rivalries; and competition among terrorist groups. The area from the Gulf to the Mediterranean now constitutes one interactive strategic theater, with multiple players and chessboards.

There is no tradition, experience, practice or system for managing regional affairs locally. Jealousies have prevented the creation of a regional security forum in the Gulf for example. Saudi Arabia was reluctant to contemplate a regional security arrangement that included Iran and Iraq to replace the British presence. Later, it formed the Gulf Cooperation Council in May 1981 at a time when Iran and Iraq were at war. The GCC has since become more of an alliance under Saudi auspices than an inclusive regional arrangement.

As inter-state conventional wars have declined, they have been replaced by asymmetric and civil wars where the state is enfeebled and challenged. This reduces the advantages of traditional militaries (and outside powers), giving militias and governments' pursuing guerrilla war strategies more leeway. Terrorism has become a threat to regional governments rather than their instrument. It has evolved from being secular and national to religious and jihadist unattached to any national cause. In the process, it has become "de-culturated" and increasingly bloody for its own sake.

Outside powers, especially the US which increased its involvement considerably after 1990 and despite retaining considerable military infrastructure, now look like marginal players in the politics of the region. Yet, external powers and especially the EU are now more directly affected by developments in the region. Middle East politics are now part of European domestic politics. Whether due to conflict, instability, or simple unemployment, migration to Europe poses sensitive moral and political/social questions for European governments and peoples alike.[14]

Prospects

Even the most hopeful product of the Arab Spring – Tunisia – is already on the brink. Predictably, the problem is one of governance: not enough jobs for the youth with degrees, and a feeble growth rate of 0.5 in 2015.[15] The possibility of regression is ever-present as long as governments are under pressure economically and from extremist groups.

The most immediate, critical, and potentially explosive issue remains the civil war in Syria which now involves to varying degrees every important regional player

as well as the two major external powers. The third, China, is most reluctant because of the apparent difficulty of not being drawn onto one side or the other. It is the regional powers, however, that are calling the shots.[16]

Turkey has found itself increasingly drawn in and weakened. Its current role as the host of 2.5 million Syrian refugees and as a critic of the Russian bombing of the Syrian opposition and support for Assad is still not appreciated by others because of Ankara's prime concern: to weaken the Kurds, who are the most effective opposition to Daesh. Turkey is frustrated by the US lack of appreciation: hence Erdogan's question: "How can we trust you? Is it me who is your partner or the terrorists in Kobane?" Turkey is now poised to take matters into its own hands by bombing and possibly intervening directly and militarily in Syria. Turkey's position is unenviable, but it has played its hand badly and for domestic political objectives.[17]

Saudi Arabia has become more activist in reaction to the threat it sees from Iran and from US inaction. This has been aggravated by the suspicion that the US seeks a reconciliation through engagement with Tehran that may be at the Kingdom's expense. With this frustration and the lack of headway in Yemen, the stakes in Syria appear all the more important, especially as Iran and its protégés have become more active (supported by Russian bombing) while the Saudi and Western-backed opposition forces are in retreat. Saudi Arabia has thus upped the ante and offered in February 2016 to provide ground troops in support of these forces and against Daesh and Assad (and Iran).[18] It has been joined by the UAE. The danger of a direct clash with Iran and its Qods force is thus becoming a real one.

Israel has been in a dilemma since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Content with the stalemated status quo and the dependability of Arab dictators, it has also sensed an opportunity: the Palestine issue is on the regional backburner and the fluidity of the region offers new possibilities.[19] If borders are to be rearranged, surely Palestine could also be a candidate? And new alignments are possible given the sectarian competition which pushes the Sunni monarchies toward any adversary of Iran. In Syria, Israel has seen the threats conventionally, for example, interdicting arms to Hizbollah and building a system for detecting underground tunnels.[20] Israel is concerned that Iran and its protégés might "win" the war. This has taken precedence over any threat posed by Daesh.[21]

Iran is the most active player in the Syrian crisis, stepping up its involvement in support of the Assad regime from advice and advisors to the active presence of Hizbollah and Shia militia recruited for the purpose in Iraq and Afghanistan and its own Qods force. This involvement has cost it perhaps $15 billion annually and the loss of over 400 lives including several Revolutionary Guards generals. For Iran,

Assad's Syria is a longstanding as well as only Arab ally (excepting post-Saddam Iraq). A "loss" in Syria for Iran would entail a setback of major proportions, blocking its access to the Levant and, more important, sustaining a visible defeat from its regional rivals. That would be hard to sell at home and explains Iran's willingness to raise the stakes despite the attendant risks.

Iran remains a "wild card" in the region because its foreign policy is tied up with the regime's sense of its own legitimacy. Tehran might be tempted to try its hand in a context that may be permissive. A number of factors may encourage Iranian brinksmanship: first of all its neighbors' weakness and its own narcissism. Second, there is the domestic factor which calls for posturing as a "revolutionary model." Concretely, Iran has every incentive to refocus the energy of the "Islamic awakening" against Israel by reviving the nearly extinct "resistance front." This could see it use the current turmoil as an opportunity for encouraging Hizbollah to test Israel by incursions or limited attacks. In its quest for regional leadership, Tehran risks over-reaching and confronting Israel or its own Sunni neighbors in the Syrian cauldron. Intemperate comments about continuing its missile programs and pride in the use of UAVs in the theater of battle indicate little restraint or consciousness of the risks of a direct clash.[22]

Saudi Arabia and Turkey's discussion of intervention in Syria, serious though it is, is also a way of putting pressure on the US to do more. The Obama administration has come under domestic pressure as well. Two experts argued, "…the more we ignore the Middle East, the more regional actors take matters into their own hands, resulting in further regional chaos."[23] At the same time, given political constraints, the US seeks more involvement by regional states, building on its own long record of cooperation, often covert, with Saudi Arabia in a variety of regional problems.[24] The pressures for consistency and coherence argued for greater incremental involvement (e.g., as in Libya), precisely what the Obama administration resisted. Hence the appeals of some: "It makes little sense to squeeze IS in only one battlefield only to let it grow somewhere else."[25]

The Syrian conflict, if anything, underscores the degree to which the Middle East had changed for the US. Consistency and coherence are simply not possible where foe and friends are interchangeable or overlap, according to the issue at hand and where crosscutting interests dictate against clear or definitive commitment before the end-game or exit strategy was clear. General Petraeus' remark: "tell me how this ends" increasingly could be read as a counsel of restraint. Where allies are unclear, interests shifting, and outcomes obscure, it makes it difficult to have a 'regional' policy.[26] Given the volatility of the situation in the region though, US

boots on the ground cannot be totally excluded. A major attack by ISIS on the US homeland or a more egregious Russian role could elicit a response, especially from a new US administration.

Russia has "upped the ante" in the Syrian conflict since autumn 2015 and by its involvement has buttressed the position of Assad. Russia has played on the fear of Daesh; on US restraint; on division of Assad's opponents; and on its own brutal methods to batter itself into the diplomacy of Syria. At the same time, growing Russian military involvement and the resultant humanitarian crisis, and the tilting of advantage toward Assad's forces, has given the US more incentive to push for a diplomatic solution, starting with a truce or ceasefire. At the time of writing (February 2016), Russia's savage methods make the West's cautious approach and excuses appear like a "selling out" of the ordinary Syrian, hoping for a result commensurate with their travails.

Finding dependable moderates to support in Syria is difficult and the risks of blowback in the case of sophisticated arms, has to be considered. "Boots on the ground" transforms the issue from a local one and risks escalation, without assuring results. Removing Assad has to be managed to ensure that the resulting void or "free for all," does not open the door to Daesh. Changing the conditions on the battlefield, as the Russians have done, may give temporary advantage to one party or another, but it cannot dictate the ultimate course of the civil war which will need to reconcile parties who have suffered unimaginably in the past five years. Buying time for such an elusive reconciliation may be the necessary precondition to any ultimate settlement. If the violence is to be contained, the future of Syria – like Iraq – may be one of de facto or "soft" partition, perhaps leading eventually to a broadly acceptable coalition government.

Conclusion

The Middle East today bears little resemblance to what it was in the 1950s or 1980s: actors, stakes, regional interactions, and external power interests have all changed. The role of the non-Arab states of the region has increased. The region from the Gulf to the Mediterranean constitutes one strategic theater. The geopolitics of oil is still important but less so. The US never had "control of the region" (to which some nostalgically and inaccurately refer).[27] The dangers of instability now stem not from superpower confrontation or energy supply interruptions, but from rolling instability into Europe via migration and jihadi terrorism. Dealing with this is much more difficult than maintaining reserve oil stocks or deterring aggression by predatory states. Stemming the movement of jihadis from Europe into the region and improving

societal resilience in Europe should be priorities.[28] The irony is that Europe now has more interests at stake in the region while having less influence.

The US can usefully contribute to regional security. First, it can focus on 'world order' issues such as non-proliferation by promoting a nuclear free zone in the region (MENFZ) and pressing the regional states to adhere to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Where regional stability is threatened by regional states militarily, the US can provide offsetting technology to the affected states, as it has in the case of the GCC countries and Israel, and anti-missile defenses.

Despite the pressure on states and the possibility of the breakup of some of them, it is important not to exaggerate the risk of further state breakup. The Sunni monarchies and Algeria are strong. The state model has no serious competitor; neither empire nor city-state has many followers. The pressure on states today can be alleviated by more flexible government probably on federal formulae.

Al Qaeda yesterday and Daesh today reflect the alienation and extremism of some groups in the region. This alienation finds resonance among some Muslim diasporas and it is among them that these groups find volunteers. This discontent is likely to persist in the face of the multiple crises outlined earlier although it need not take the forms of the recent two decades. Daesh soon may be superseded by another group with less ambitious or divisive goals. But without political change and better economic performance, discontent will continue to seek expression in some form of violence.

The single most important factor in stabilizing the region, the creation of legitimate (representative, inclusive, accountable) and effective governments, represents nation-building, which cannot be the gift of any external power. The most an external power can do is to help promote civil society in those states searching for solutions; prod and nudge regional states toward greater responsibility and restraint in their regional interactions and ambitions; and reassure those truly vulnerable states about assistance in the case of blatant aggression, whether from neighbors or militant groups like Daesh.

The future of sectarian conflict depends largely on Iran-Saudi relations but also on how domestic politics in the region evolve. Regimes have stoked up the sectarian issue for internal political advantage (consider Maliki) to substitute for effective government. It is also the case that the sectarian divide has been aggravated by "the rise of narrower and more extreme forms of Islamism"[29] which could be softened. It is often stated that Islam is still awaiting its Reformation. With large Muslim populations living in secular, pluralist societies in Europe, the catalyst for such a

reformation may come from Europe. Europe's Muslims are in a special position to show their Middle Eastern counterparts the way toward a more open, moderate, and modern Islam that is compatible with a secular, pluralist society.

The regional states themselves must take on more responsibility and broaden their vision. Iran and Saudi Arabia are fated to live side by side. They have no historical record of conflict and no specific territorial disputes. They have much in common besides the export of oil. Environmental issues that are likely to loom large in the future will require their cooperation, if they are to be tackled effectively. Humanitarian and economic assistance and cultural contacts should be increased. And there should be a more energetic prodding of all regional actors into a peace process. Posing as "security manager," "partner" and a merchant of arms is a sorry role for a great power.

What must be avoided is giving some regional states carte blanche to act with the assurance that there will be no price to pay or that the US will remain unconditionally behind them. Moving "offshore," as it were, to a secondary role in the region is desirable not because outside powers lack military power or staying power. It is due simply to the fact that most of the problems of the region are not resolvable by military power or arms supplies.[30] Increased Western involvement over the past half century has distorted regional relations.[31] Making these states assume responsibility for their region is the beginning of making them answerable and mature states as opposed to "free-loading" ones. Almost contiguous to Europe, it is time for the region to assume responsibility for its own tumultuous destiny. In any case, it is no longer possible for others to do so.

Endnotes

1. Robert Cooper, *The Post Modern State and World Order* (London: Demos, 1996) and *The Breaking of Nations* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).
2. "Iraqi Kurdistan President: Time Has Come to Redraw Middle East Boundaries," *The Guardian,* January 22, 2016. See also Alaraby.co.uk (February 3, 2016.)
3. Israel too is torn between its secular past and the rise of religion. See Steven Erlanger, "Who Are the True Heirs of Zionism?" *New York Times,* February 4, 2016.
4. "The uprisings of 2010 that toppled regimes in the so-called Arab Spring were as much a cry for services as for democracy." *The Economist,* "Aiwa (Yes) Minister," November 14, 2015, 33.
5. There are five Sunnis for every three Shii in the Middle East. There are Shii majorities only in Iran, Bahrain, and Iraq (&Azerbaijan) with significant minorities in Lebanon and Syria.
6. Consider the Saudi encouragement of a US strike on Iran and then the Kingdom's petulance about the nuclear agreement. Take another case: King Abdullah's letter to Bush threatening to "reassess" relations with the US. The letter of August 2001 came at the height of unipolarity, a month before 15 Saudis were implicated in 9/11.
7. Sam Jones, Erika Solomon and Kathrin Hille, "Vladimir Putin Asked Bashar al-Assad to Step down," *The Financial Times,* January 22, 2016.
8. There are dangers for arms suppliers of getting mixed up in local conflicts/feuds. Britain's enthusiasm for selling arms has led it into the Yemen war. "We are offering Saudi Arabia advice and training on best-practice targeting techniques": surely a new low in the use of "management-speak." See Ewen MacAskill, "Labour Raises Pressure on Cameron to Explain Yemen Involvement," *The Guardia,* January 28, 2016.
9. Thomas Friedman, "Iran and the Obama Doctrine," *New York Times,* April 5, 2015.
10. See especially Carlotta Gall, "Pakistan's Hand in the Rise of International Jihad," *New York Times,* February 6, 2016.
11. This concerns governments outside of Europe as well; consider South and East Asia where Daesh has made inroads "though you still have a range of local

brands." Some of these seek alliances with Daesh. See Victor Mallet "Terror: The Globalization of Extremism," *Financial Times,* February 1, 2016.

12. Daesh is a potential competitor. See Yoel Guzansky: "One of the reasons for Riyadh's resolve to fight against Islamic State both within Saudi borders and beyond may be the entity's ideological resemblance to the Wahhabi ideal and the challenge posed by the caliphate to the kingdom's pan-Islamic vision." "The Islamic state versus the Saudi state" in *The Islamic State: How Viable Is it?* edited by Yoram Schweitzer and Omer Einay (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2016), 177.

13. For, as Charles Lister has noted, Daesh at its most basic level is a "revolutionary actor whose entire modus operandi is designed to project a goal of radical political and social change." *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2015), 34.

14. In the Middle East, 60 percent of the population is under 25. Youth unemployment is 25-30 percent. (In Iran, 20 million are between 25 and 35, which equals 50 percent of the electorate.) Unemployed youth will look toward Europe where the birthrate is stagnant and greying. The "pull" and "push" factors are self-evident and the latter will only be intensified if there are continued conflicts or governments that fail to perform economically for their citizens.

15. 700,000 unemployed with 250,000 youth with degrees. See Haleh Saleh, "Tunisia Protests Echo Spark for Arab Spring," The Financial Times, January 20, 2016; Haleh Saleh, "Tunisia Declares Nationwide Curfew after Days of Rioting," *Financial Times,* January22, 2016; and "Trouble in Tunisia: Dying to Work for the Government," The Economist, January 30, 2016, 28.

16. See Dmitri Trenin, "Syria's Future Lies in Its Neighbours' Hands," *The Financial Times,* February 9, 2016.

17. See Ceylan Yeginsu, "As Syria Devolves Further, Allies Criticize American Policy," *New York Times,* February 10, 2016; "Erdogan Calls on the US To Choose between Turkey or Syrian Kurds," The Peninsula, February 8, 2016 in "Gulf in the Media." See also Henri Barkey, "Erdogan's Foreign Policy in Ruins," Foreign Policy, February 4, 2016. For Turkey and intervention, see Cengiz Candar, "Will He, Won't He? Turks Ponder whether Erdogan Will Invade Syria," *Al Monitor,* February 10, 2015.

18. Mehul Srivastava, Erika Solomon, et al., "Saudis Make Plans to Deploy Ground Troops in Syria," *Financial Times* February 9, 2016. See also David Schenker, "The Shift in Saudi Foreign Policy," February 10, 2016, http:://www.washin.st/WeiyaaZ.

19. The theme of the Annual Security Conference in Israel (INSS) in 2016 was "The Changing Rules of the Game in the Middle East."

20. John Reed, "Israel Developing 'Underground' Iran Dome," *Financial Times,* February 3, 2016.

21. See "Le ministre de la defense d'Israel "prefere Da'ech" a l'Iran," *Le Monde,* January 22, 2016; Aron Heller AP, ABC news, February 3, 2016. On Israel's view of Iran versus Daesh and on the Syrian civil war, see Shlomo Brom, "Israel and the Islamic State" in *The Islamic State: How Viable Is It?* Edited by Schweitzer and Einay, op.cit., 187-193.

22. For representative examples, see Adam Eliyahu Berkowitx, "Top Iranian General Threatens Israel with "defensive ICBMS," *Breaking Israeli News,* February 5, 2016; Gareth Jennings and Neil Gibson, "Iranian UAV Shown Striking Targets in Syria and Iraq," Janes Defence Weekly, February 5, 2016; Thomas Erdbrink, "Iranian Commander Dismisses Saudi Role in Syria," *New York Times* February 6, 2016; "Foreign Ground Intervention to Intensify Syria Crisis: Iran," Press TV, February 8, 2016. See also, Gen. Hossein Salami's boasting on the 37th anniversary of the IRI, "Iran Has Built Great Capabilities," MEMRI *Special Dispatch* No. 6302, February 12, 2016.

23. Jim Jeffrey and Soner Cagaptay,"Preventing a Middle Eastern Gordian Knot,"Commentary, February 3, 2016, (http://warontherocks.com/category/commentary); Ashish Kumar Sen, "Plan Seen Taking Heat off Gulf Arab States over Role in War on ISIS, Putting the Onus on the US to Do More," February 9, 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/saudi-offer-to-deploy-troops-to-syria-turns-the-tables-on-the-united-states.

24. Mark Mazetti and Matt Apuzzo, "US Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels," *New York Times,* January 23, 2016; Michael Schmidt and Helene Cooper, "Challenge for Defense Secretary: Get More Arab Allies to do More to Combat ISIS," New York Times, February 9, 2016.

25. "Libya: The Third Front," The Economist, February 6, 2016, 9; Erik Schmitt, "Obama Is Pressed to Open Military Front against ISIS in Lebanon," New York Times , February 4, 2016; Criticism from Tony Cordesman, "Creeping Incrementalism: US Forces and Strategy in Iraq and Syria from 2011 to 2016: An Update," January 29, 2016 (http://www.csis.org/1KKOAgU)

26. For a lucid discussion of this, see Steve Walt, "The United States Should Admit it No Longer Has a Middle East Policy," *Foreign Policy,* January 29, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/29/the-u-s-should-admit-it-has-no-middle-east-policy-obama-cold-war-isael-syria.

27. Gideon Richman, "Preserving American Power," *The National Interest,* January/February 2016 (no.141), 18. It may have been to this type of inaccurate representation of the past that President Obama was referring when he observed: "America is famously ahistorical …" See, "A Conversation in Iowa, Part 2," *The New York Review of Books,* November 19, 2015.

28. This includes a more flexible approach than a facile repetition of the mantra of *laicite* (secularism). In the case of France, far from being neutral, this insistence has been a method of targeting Muslims. See Sudhir Hazareesingh, "Hardline Secularism Will Not Solve France's Problems," The Financial Times, January 28, 2016.

29. Vali Nasr, "The War for Islam," *Foreign Policy,* January 22, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/22/the-war-for-islam-sunni-shiite-iraq-syria/ .

30. See Paul Pillar, "The Forgotten Benefits of Offshore Balancing," January 27, 2016, http://lobelog.com/the-forgotten-benefits-of-offshore-balancing. For a superb discussion, see Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

31. External powers' encounter with the region has left its scars on them. Consider the US since 9/11: suspicious of foreigners and obsessed by the possibility of terrorism, far less hospitable and generous in its treatment of refugees (accepting 2,500 Syrians of the 4.5 million displaced abroad) and a less attractive society on many levels. As one French statesmen said of the US after 9/11: "The magic has gone."

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