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The Middle East and North Africa: Change and Upheaval 2015

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The Middle East and North Africa: Change and Upheaval 2015

Dr. Christian Koch

The Geneva Center for Security Policy, the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, and the Gulf Research Center convened in Gstaad in June 2015 for their annual discussions on developments in the Middle East. Bringing together renowned regional, security, and policy experts in order to assess the current situation in the Middle East, the meeting focused on the changing strategic landscape and the geopolitical and regional dynamics at play, assessed the state and implications of the Arab Revolutions, and took an in-depth look at the situation in the Levant, Turkey, North Africa, the Gulf region, and Israel and Palestine. It was acknowledged that the Middle East was undergoing fundamental shifts including a move from state centric approaches to non-state issues and from a national to a transnational focus. With the region subsumed by numerous transitions at different levels, a key question dominating the discussion was not about whether but who or what will fill the ever-expanding vacuum.

The Changing Landscape of the Middle East

The developments in the Middle East over the period June 2014 to June 2015 have continued the debate on whether the region is undergoing deep structural change or

whether what has occurred over the previous year, including the fall of Mosul and expansion of the Islamic State, the disintegration of Libya and the Houthi capture of the Yemeni capital Sanaa, can simply be seen as a continuation of previous events. There is little doubt that a level of dichotomy exists when framing developments in terms of chaotic fragmentation vs. spheres of influence, a regional scene based on multi-polarity vs. no one in charge, the re-emergence of the strong Mukhabarat state in the post-autocratic stage vs. weak disintegrating states, the United States as a security activist vs. the US moving towards a role of being an offshore balancer, as well as the state being seen as a threat vs. the state as the solution.

The rise of non-state actors such as the Islamic State as competitors to the state has led to questions whether a state-building project such as that put forward by IS can be considered as sustainable or whether the IS's emergence remains in essence nothing more than an anti-state phenomenon. This question remains unanswered. In the territories where IS has entrenched itself, the move towards a form of transnational state is not something that is widely shared. Rather, in Iraq for example, the notion of territorial nationalism remains intact. Yet, given that the Islamic State does represent the rejection of the Westphalian notion of sovereignty, its emergence has led to questions about the viability of the state in the Middle East. To put this into context, it becomes necessary to distinguish between the failure of the state and the failure of governance highlighted by the level of societal discontent that exists in many countries that have so far not seen their state institutions collapse. Thus, while the state still exists in the sense that the UN recognizes it, it certainly has seen its feasibility questioned at the societal level.

The bottom line is that the Islamic State has emerged as a potent force because it has been able to provide and offer protection to people who are feeling highly vulnerable. At the same time, the IS is pursuing a global agenda and strategy, which has been in the making for quite some time, whose core idea is the protection of the Sunni population. From that perspective, a more sophisticated effort than the present focus on aerial bombardment or militia building as a strategy to defeat IS is required.

With most Middle Eastern societies riven internally especially over the role of religion in society, the Sunni-Shia divide is also growing, exacerbating both regional and domestic splits. Sectarian issues are being increasingly instrumentalized by various actors who benefit from the competing sources of identity. Sectarianism has legs given that the state fails to provide services, and within fragmented societies, intense national sub-identities have certainly reemerged. Yet, sectarian clashes are also part of wider geopolitical and geostrategic struggles.

In such environment, rather than viewing regional rivalries and domestic issues as separate, one should instead adopt a point of view of regional re-ordering with common local issues. Although local domestic issues are likely to dominate the overall landscape with the result of conflict being localized, smaller and different in tempo, the idea of the Middle East as separate from the rest of the world remains a non-starter. This is because globalization remains a tremendous influence as witnessed by social empowerment, constrained states, increased demands on the state, and widespread demonstration effects.

Linked to internal developments, US policy as an external component remains a central feature. Recent US approaches have exposed the limits of coercive diplomacy to the point that the assumption that regional solutions follow outside military intervention is proving inaccurate. Alongside the strong counter movement in the US against further involvement in the Middle East, what one is seeing as far as US policy is concerned is a return of the Nixon Doctrine in terms of the envelope being passed back to regional actors who are tasked with taking on a greater share of responsibility for their neighborhood. This does not mean that the US is bound to have a policy that is acceptable to all given that it supports incompatible allies. Nor does it imply an inevitable decline or weakening of the US position. The question that does remain is whether regional states will be up to the task or whether a greater degree of polarization among them is inevitable.

The Uprisings: Four Years On

Although some have argued that the Arab Spring has withered away, the overall sense is that domestic politics is still playing itself out, albeit at different speeds and at different levels in the countries most directly impacted. With the state-society relationship undergoing fundamental changes, political developments in the Middle East need to be seen as part of a much longer-term process.

Given the numerous and different responses witnessed to the outbreak of protests so far, the question to be concerned about is the way forward. While in Tunisia, the willingness of moderate Islamists and broader elements of civil society to work together is seen as a positive outcome, the Egyptian case clearly contains the prospect of a return of authoritarianism. Given that implementing change is accompanied by tremendous social dislocation and often times widespread violence, the prevalent choice is for a re-establishment of stability over the more risky road of democracy promotion. Yet with the return of the old elite, one is also seeing a regression to the prevailing rentier mentality at the expense of pushing ahead with comprehensive economic and social reform. The combination of a quieting of the

population and the unwillingness by societal actors to engage in further protests underscores that the assumption that people were protesting for a value-based democratic system was misplaced. Rather, internal scenes are marred by multiple and at times overlapping motivations with both power-holders and opposition elements engaging in largely zero-sum battles. The result is a high securitization of even domestic political processes in which choices of whom to support are often based on choosing the lesser evil.

The Levant

The zero-sum process has certainly been playing itself out in the Syrian context where the Assad regime displays absolutely no willingness to relent any aspects of its power. The moderate opposition made gains until the involvement of Hizbollah gave the initiative back to the regime, yet even the government has suffered setbacks and is faced with declining conscription rates to maintain its war machinery. As a result, the emphasis of the Assad regime is on consolidating and protecting its hold on Damascus and the Alawi hinterland.

Given the almost total divorce between state and society in Syria, the outlook for any sort of decisive military victory is weak. For the moment, any shift in the balance of power is unlikely to determine the outcome of potential political talks, an equation that is further hardened by the role of external actors. Thus, while it was suggested that the Syrian military command has yielded much of its control to Iran, the US's primary focus remains on battling the IS with no apparent move to act with decisiveness against the Syrian regime. The result is that the wider international community has left the Syrian issue to the UN to handle. A solution may be forthcoming only following some form of Saudi-Iranian détente or some form of wider regional understanding.

As far as Lebanon is concerned, the fact that the country has been almost two years without a President shows a degree of resilience, although the economic situation is becoming increasingly dire. The Syrian crisis has badly affected Lebanon, with Syrian refugees becoming a new community inside Lebanon. Eventually, as was suggested, they could emerge as a force that is ready to mobilize against Hizbollah. In the meantime, a crucial issue that is likely to come to the forefront is the control of the Lebanese border. Due to the overall complexities of identities along the entire Lebanese-Syrian border, the ability of Hizbollah to maintain control over the border has become increasingly difficult, in turn possibly exposing Damascus. Hizbollah control could also be challenged by the Lebanese army which has begun to distance itself from any extensive control by Hizbollah.

The result is an existential battle for Hizbollah which has tied its fate to that of the Assad regime. A key question is how Hizbollah will be able to sustain its military effort inside Syria – both financially and with regard to its personnel given the mounting battlefield losses. A decline in influence could open up of a debate over the Lebanese national accord which, for the moment, remains a bulwark against a complete loss of the country's stability. Instead, an increased aggressiveness and paranoid reaction on the part of the Hizbullah could lead to greater attempts at retribution against other national forces even to the point of trying to take over the Lebanese government.

From a regional dimension, Lebanon has stayed stable due to the fact that Iran and Saudi Arabia have tacitly decided not to allow their rivalry to impact the country. Such tacit understanding could be nearing its end given Saudi Arabia's determination to counter Iran's influence wherever it can. This too points to a potential flash point that would directly impact on Lebanon's stability. What the developments in Lebanon as well as Syria reveal is the existence of dual dynamics at play including the maintenance of some form of equilibrium on the one hand versus potential dynamics that could quickly challenge the current state of affairs on the other.

Parliamentary elections held in Turkey in June 2015 were initially seen as a major defeat for President Erdogan's experiment to impose an extensive presidential system on the country, yet the fact that Erdogan has built up a lot of institutional and non-institutional power within the country first led to renewed election held in November 2015 and a subsequent reversal in Erdogan's fortunes. The internal developments held repercussions for Turkey's Syria policy where the Kurds have emerged as important actors including the increased cooperation between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds and the initial unexpected victory of the HDP in the Turkish elections held in June 2015. What this points to is that while Kurdish independence is not likely in the immediate future, there is some movement in such a direction. The fact that the US broke ranks with Turkey in supporting the PYD in Syria has also led to a continuing crisis in Turkish-US relations. All of this is further complicated by the growing problem posed by the Islamic State for Turkey. The Turkish shift towards the US in terms of supporting the war against the Islamic State is little more than a cover for Turkey to attack the Syrian Kurds and eliminate further notions of Kurdish independence from materializing.

Although the Jordanian economy remains dependent on the goodwill of the rulers from the Gulf region to provide necessary financial assistance, King Abdullah has still been able to consolidate his power due to the fact that the Jordanian opposition remains in disarray. By the summer of 2015, the slowdown of the economy

and consequent job losses has not resulted in Islamist groups being able to tap into rising frustrations also because the government has undertaken steps to undermine the local Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, the combination of a continued poor economic situation exacerbated by high and rising refugee numbers, and an opposition that moves more into the Salafist camp, means that the King cannot count on the domestic environment remaining unchanged. In fact, if a major crisis were to erupt, the ability of the system to deal with it might test the regime more than ever before.

Iran: Domestic Politics and Security Implications

The successful conclusion to the nuclear talks with Iran has given President Rouhani an important domestic boost. Rouhani had staked his political future on this issue and a key aspect now will be on how to meet the expectations that have been raised with regard to the lifting of sanctions. While Rouhani has not moved forward publicly with advocating widespread political reforms, his government has been successful in bringing technocrats back into the bureaucracy, opening up book publishing, and allowing some level of political party activity to be restarted. The next key dates will be the February 2016 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections which will show whether the Rouhani administration is able to carry any momentum resulting from the nuclear accord negotiations forward.

For the US, the objective of the nuclear talks has not been to eliminate Iran's nuclear program but to restrict it as much as possible. In addition, the US has signaled a wider shift in terms of repositioning its policy towards rogue states from regime change to one focused on changing regime behavior. With the nuclear agreement, both Iran and the United States used the available technical and political space to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion. In the end, it was important to satisfy co-existing narratives from both sides: for the US, this was about buying time while for Iran it was about being allowed to retain its nuclear hedge. Still, fundamental questions remain about how the agreement will be implemented given, for example, that verification mechanisms as demanded by the P5+1 are perceived as spying techniques by many inside Iran and the fact that regional relations, such as those with Saudi Arabia, have deteriorated to the point that the regional climate makes overall implementation difficult. As such, a low trust environment among all key parties is maintained.

Regionally, Iran has challenged the US-imposed regional order but the Islamic Republic finds itself in a precarious position given that much of that regional order has dissipated in recent years. The nuclear agreement does imply recognition of Iran's

status and the sanctions relief it provides could lead to some form of moderation in terms of state behavior. Whether this will affect Iranian policy in Syria is doubtful given the significant Iranian investment in the preservation of the Assad regime. Both the US and Iran have denied that a link exists between the nuclear accord and other regional issues although the eventual possibility of spillover of some form of goodwill cannot be discounted. While Iran is looking for an opening from Saudi Arabia, the on-going conflict in Yemen as well as the emergence of an assertive leadership in Riyadh as a result of King Salman's ascension in January 2015 makes such an opening difficult to envision. And just as there are interest groups in both the US and Iran opposed to the nuclear agreement, there are forces in both states hoping to build on it. All of this points to the fact that the implications of the nuclear deal are bound to stay transactional rather than transformational in the near term.

North Africa

Turning to North Africa, Libya deteriorated into further conflict compounded by the steady influx of foreign fighters. Despite the fact that Libya does have enough economic resources to start down the road to recovery, the failure to include the losers of the revolution into any sort of political process has led to numerous splits and fighting being carried out on various fronts. Coalitions appear and evaporate quickly. To counteract these developments, it is argued that some form of peacekeeping forces will be needed in order to allow for a comprehensive political process to take root although it remains unclear whether even such an approach would work. While it is unlikely that Libya will rapidly move towards a possible split, the more that the views of different groups on federalism are ignored, the louder the calls for secession become. What is instead required is for the international community to abandon its wait-and-see attitude given that such a strategy is not viable to contain the potential cross-border impacts as has been seen in Tunisia. Still, the perception that extremist groups have been able to gain control over much of southern Libya is not accurate given that militias dominant there are primarily tribally based.

The larger issue in North Africa and the wider Middle East is that the debate about the course of political development remains incomplete and unfinished. In Tunisia, it is said the country has passed what Samuel Huntington referred to as "the two-turnover test." Yet, it is also the case that transitional justice has been delayed and that the Tunisian security forces remain ill-equipped to deal with current security challenges. Furthermore, insufficient attention is being paid to the developments in Algeria where, it was argued, one is seeing the failure of the post-colonial state, in turn threatening the stability of the country.

Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council States, and Iraq

The role being played by the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has become more contentious in the period under examination here. While Saudi Arabia experienced a smooth transition of power in January 2015 (a subsequent power reshuffle in March 2015 was more contentious), the kingdom's decision to interfere in Yemen was seen as a bold strategic move whose consequences remain to be seen. The major objective of the coalition headed by Saudi Arabia was to eliminate the military threat from the Houthi group (who are viewed as being Iranian supported) and re-establish the government of Abdo Mansour Hadi, in turn also preventing a state within a state being established inside Yemen as far as the Houthi movement was concerned. In line with its posture on Yemeni developments, there is the likelihood of Saudi Arabia leading the GCC to follow a policy line that is more decisive and aggressive especially vis-à-vis Iran. This includes not only Yemen but also in Bahrain and in Syria. The notion in capitals such as Riyadh is simply that Iranian interference has been ignored too long.

Saudi Arabia underlined its readiness to act independently by not informing the US about the start of the Yemeni campaign, which in turn also points to a broader realignment of regional relations. While acknowledging that there are real differences in US-Saudi relations, it was argued that tensions are also exaggerated. Given its current basing structure in the Gulf, it is simply inaccurate to suggest that the US is in fact in the process of leaving the Gulf and pivoting to Asia. Equally, the fact the US views the threat from Iranian regional policy in different terms than Saudi Arabia cannot be equated with suggestions that the US is in the process of establishing a new alliance with Iran. What instead drives the policy divide is the divergent priorities that each side gives regional issues with the US placing its emphasis on combatting the Islamic State and Saudi Arabia seeing Iran as the key issue to be dealt with. Given that this split in priorities is not about to be solved, there is a need for the divergences to be better managed.

In Iraq is concerned, the US appears to be drawing the wrong lessons in terms of its current strategy against the Islamic State from the period 2007-2009 when al-Qaeda was defeated in Iraq. While the current US approach is to double down in the hope that the Arab Sunni tribes will switch their allegiance once again away from extremist groups, this ignores the fact that even the first time around tribal Sheikhs supported US policy because individuals were afraid that others might lay claim to control and power. There is also little that the US can do to assure tribal leaders that the flow of assistance, both from the US and through the central government in Baghdad, this time around will continue over the longer term. Here,

the disillusionment has become too pervasive. An additional problem is that the Arab Sunnis themselves are divided with many rejecting the current set-up of the Iraqi state after having not been brought into the political process. Even if a central government is able to begin providing basic services, the obvious priority for all Iraqis, there is a real danger that the Sunni-Shi'a divide could instead become further institutionalized within the Iraqi state.

Israel and Palestine

The four items on the agenda as far as Israeli defense and security are concerned are the nuclear agreement with Iran, relationship with the Palestinians, the possibility of escalation of tension on either the Gaza/Hamas or Lebanon/Hizbollah front, and the status of US-Israel relations. In terms of the nuclear agreement, the discourse inside Israel has changed from one where Israel was adamantly opposed to any sort of agreement to one where it has to learn to live with the outcome. The emphasis now is on linking the implementation of the nuclear accord to other issues related to Iranian behavior. The outcome of the negotiations with Iran have had their impact on US-Israeli relations; while at the operational level, relations are as close as ever, political relations have never seen such a difficult phase. Part of the problem is the fact that Prime Minister Netanyahu has made Israel a partisan issue in domestic US politics due to his public opposition to the nuclear deal.

Significantly, there is an almost complete decentralization of the Palestinian question to the point of it becoming a residual question. Due to its moral dimension in terms of being considered a rights issue over occupation and foreign rule as well as its religious dimension with Jerusalem at the heart from an epistemological point of view, the Arab-Israeli conflict remains on the top of the global agenda. Yet, there are no real prospects for a negotiated solution and instead there seems to be a slow inevitable slide towards a one-state reality. On the Israeli front, there is very little belief within the policy community that bilateral negotiations can lead anywhere. Rather, it is felt that other regional options should be considered including the Arab Peace Plan first offered by Saudi Arabia alongside more involvement from Egypt and Jordan. This, however, presents its own problems as handing the issue over to other Arabs countries could force these states to take a harder line so that they are not accused of selling out on previous commitments. One new factor might be the emergence of a more dynamic alternate Palestinian leadership from within although the contours of what this would look like and how such a new leadership can build on the failures of past self-determination and resistance movements remains unclear.

Synthesis and Conclusions

In all of the discussions, the filling of a vacuum emerged as a predominant theme regarding the developments as far as the Middle East is concerned. While there was a lot of emphasis on shifts and transitions, these have to be viewed within the context of scale, for example to what degree one can talk about tectonic shifts and/or about shifts from Arab to non-Arab issues, from state centric approaches to non-state issues, or from a national to a transnational focus. On the local level, new conceptual divides are opening up in terms of issues such as the place of religion in societies and the associated political engineering that takes place with the use of religion. There are also questions about the sociology of the state especially as it relates to the question of whether the Islamic State can be looked at from the perspective of a new state entity. Related questions include the quality of regimes and whether one can identify them as authoritarian, semi-authoritarian etc., and the debate about centralization, federalism, and other forms of state organization. The street has learned to speak and denounced the unjust and unperforming state. It has not rejected the state as such. Reconstituting the state, instilling good and inclusive governance are the prerequisite for a more viable regional order. It promises to be a long haul.

At the regional and international level, there are open questions around alliances, partnerships and relationships between partners. What exists at the moment is a much looser form of alliance with less constraining ties between allies than in the past. US-GCC relations are one example in this regard. What remains to be seen is whether there is a move to greater autonomy by clients vis-à-vis their former patrons, whether one is moving to a context of two great powers competing regionally (Iran, Saudi Arabia) or whether a more neo-imperial system based on a Turkish or Iranian construct is in the works. To be sure, there has been a movement towards the erosion of coercive diplomacy as well as shifts in the capacity to weigh on the region including that of the US. Within the broader context of this, the boundaries between domestic politics and regional politics are increasingly blurred.

Much of what was discussed can be viewed from the perspective of structure, identity, and agency. The lack of an organizing principle for the region should not be equated with the notion that the Middle East can be considered an outlier region. To be sure, complex linkages have developed alongside the breakdown of states into sub-state units. The end of the autocratic state as a result of the Arab Spring has led or has contributed to a breakdown of institutions with the result that present reconstituted states, such as Egypt, are being re-introduced as potential solutions. All this suggests inherent structural contradictions that do not allow for an overlaying explanatory variable and where transactional vs transformation dynamics are ever present.

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