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Key Points

- *The Middle East is going through a profound period of transformation accompanied by widespread violence. Due to the deep crisis of the nation-state, overlapping lines of confrontation have come together to produce a high degree of volatility.*
- *The erosion of leverage, power and influence of domestic, regional and external actors, the increased inability of traditional state actors to change or deal with regional events and developments, and the continued rise of non-state actors marked by their unfettered use of violence, poses the most direct threat to the regional system and the integrity of its member states.*
- *There are no winners within the regional environment nor are there clear answers as to the expected future trajectories that events in the Middle East will take. Instead, what is clear is that the Middle East region will experience a prolonged period of instability.*
- *The political transition that numerous countries in the Middle East have experienced are defined by the different levels of commitment by regime elites to the principles of dialogue, inclusion and compromise rather than specific structural factors. This can be seen with regard to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Iraq.*
- *In terms of the nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran, if the two sides are able to come to an agreement on limiting Iran's nuclear breakout capability, the momentum might lead to more tacit cooperation on regional affairs especially between Iran and the US. This, however, seems less likely than a stalemate on the nuclear issue and continued indirect rivalry regionally.*
- *For Israel, the Palestinian issue has been downgraded as a security issue and replaced with Iran as the only existential threat currently on the table. Overall, inside Israel solving the Arab-Israeli issue is no longer seen as the key to solving other regional issues.*

The breakdown of state structures and the wider regional political order has resulted in a complex tapestry of conflict throughout the Middle East that is likely to produce a continued period of volatility and violence for several years to come. This is because there are numerous dynamics at play that are competing with one another across various levels. Within these dynamics, religion as a mobilizing factor which, alongside sectarianism has emerged as a primary driving force for many of the ongoing conflicts. In addition, the deep crisis of the nation-state has released different dichotomies resulting in

overlapping lines of confrontation that seem to be exploding all at once. The situation is exacerbated by the diminished leverage of global players on regional forces and regional players over national ones, thus significantly complicating the search for solutions.

Within this context, there appear to be no winners within the regional environment nor are there clear answers as to the expected future trajectories. Instead, numerous questions are raised that include the fate of political Islam as well as the consequences of the shifting sands of regional structures, including

a slow disappearance of existing boundaries, leading to changing allegiances and possibly permanent population movements. The impact of the rising level of violence within political contestation both institutional and non-institutional and the wider implications of rising social fragmentation, including questions of national identity are other questions to ponder. Finally, there are the consequences of the current general reluctance of external forces to get involved, characterized by imperfect leadership and the search for magical solutions. Based on these uncertainties, it is clear that the Middle East will experience a prolonged period of instability and volatility. At the same time, there is the need for more concerted efforts at the global and regional level to stop the slow regional and national disintegration taking place.

Taking Stock of the Arab Revolutions

Within political transition, the different levels of commitment by regime elites to the principles of dialogue, inclusion and compromise seem to have greater impact on political developments in Middle East states than do other structural factors. This can be seen in the developments taking place in Tunisia and Egypt with the former moving forward in its political transition while the latter has regressed towards greater degrees of authoritarianism and militarization. Tunisia has also shown that the factors of history, the role of civil society, leadership and international pressures are important determinants for charting a course of political development and a state's movement towards some form of democratic transition.

Outside of Tunisia, most of the rest of the Middle East has moved in the opposite direction. In Egypt, the government under newly elected President El-Sissi is likely to become increasingly caught within a number of discourses on which it will be challenged to deliver. This includes the ability of the military establishment to solve key economic and social issues, the increasing restriction on social mobilization forcing the government to rely on smaller segments of society for continued support, a populist rhetoric that will be seen as largely empty if the government is unable to fulfill expectations, as well as the continued securitization of politics that further restricts the internal political discourse. In Libya, the fact that the state has been absent while changes have taken place within the country has meant that the mechanism of state control has been largely eroded resulting in increased lawlessness, rising ethnic and tribal conflict, and the spread of organized crime. While there is still room for political bargaining in Libya, rising

armed confrontations are more likely to undermine any efforts toward political reconciliation and lead to a further increase in ideological competition and extremist policies.

In Syria, the prospects for a political solution are basically non-existent with the level of violence propagated by the regime and the insistence of the opposition on accountability preventing any sort of reconciliation between the opposition and the Assad regime. While the Assad government has pursued a military solution to the conflict as the only way forward, the lack of support for moderate opposition forces at the outset by the wider international community is seen as having led to the rise of extremist groups that are now dominating the situation on the ground. The current situation perpetuates the all-or-nothing calculation from the Assad regime, the Islamist groups and the secular component of the opposition that prevents any effective compromise from being successfully implemented whether at the national, regional, or international level.

In Iraq, there is a much wider Sunni revolt occurring outside the recent advances by the ISIS group which reflects the general alienation of the Sunni population from the Iraqi state that will increasingly fracture the state as such. This disintegration has been exacerbated by the Maliki government's destruction of the command structure of the armed forces. The result is a radicalization of the Shia community, the degrading of the institutional capacity of the state, and the further integration of Iran into Iraqi command and control structures leading Iraq into a renewed state of civil war. In the north of the country, Kurdish autonomy is being solidified although for the moment this is occurring within the existing Iraqi federal structure.

Lebanon and Jordan are the two states that retain levels of state capacity but those capacities are also increasingly under strain from the developments in Iraq and Syria. Both countries are impacted by the immediate and medium-term effects of the refugee crisis, resulting in increased burdens being placed on the social service systems in the short term as well as in changing demographics with refugees further integrating into these states in the longer term. They are further witnessing a potential radicalization within their Sunni communities, and there are rifts being created within their political systems to the point that trans-border ties are being created which further dilutes central political control.

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Overall, the Levant is likely to retain its territorial boundaries while the domestic distribution of power will shift toward some form of federalism including a possible Mashreq alliance among minorities. Thus, while borders are unlikely to change despite all of the talk of the death of the Sykes-Picot arrangement, the meaning of borders is changing and quite dramatically so. How this transformation will play out or whether it becomes an element of stability remains to be seen.

Iran: Domestic Politics and Security Implications

One country that presents itself as being stable is Iran although when we consider its domestic politics, there is a level of insecurity that is palpable. Since his election in 2013, President Hassan Rouhani has been able to maneuver with some success within the zero-sum power game that characterizes the political system of the Islamic Republic. This is mainly because Rouhani has stuck to his agenda of the nuclear issue and not ventured into other contentious areas and has made no attempt to build an independent power base that could threaten the position of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. While the regime remains worried about the potential of some form of renewed social mobilization among the population, this is not an immediate likelihood given the overall weariness within the larger society toward such a move. Yet the revolution does appear to be hitting a fork in the road when it comes to defining its future path and trajectory. Iranian politics remains a mixture of pragmatism and opportunism; yet factionalism among the elite has led to the question whether the revolution has run out of steam. Within this context, there are also growing discussions about Iran's regional influence and the cost associated with foreign adventurism. Moreover, the sectarian divide in the region has added another complicating factor with Iran feeling that it is being dragged into a conflict not of its own making.

The nuclear issue has become an issue of survival for the regime, and as such a fault line in domestic politics as well. It appears unlikely that negotiations can be successfully concluded by the July 20 deadline with the most likely scenario being that negotiations will continue for another six months until January 2015. Yet even given that current talks between Iran and the P5+1 have been characterized by a new optimism, and that both sides are interested in maintaining a façade of a gradual step-by-step process that would lead to a final agreement, the fact remains that bringing the current process to a successful conclusion is unlikely. For the US, domestic pressures from Congress as well as regional objections by countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia means that there is little flexibility within the P 5+1 to agree on a final framework that would alleviate all concerns. For Iran, a mechanism that would freeze elements of the program while

forgoing some other aspects could be acceptable but not to the point where the nuclear program is being rolled back or dismantled. If Iran and the US are able to come to an agreement on limiting Iran's nuclear breakout capability in the coming months, the momentum might lead to some tacit cooperation on regional affairs. Without being a game-changer, it could lead to a better atmosphere and greater restraint on the part of Iran. This seems less likely though than a stalemate on the nuclear issue and continued indirect rivalry regionally. Although 'no agreement' may reassure the GCC states, it will see the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia continue unabated while the sectarian divisions throughout the region remain unresolved. The key lies in effect with Iran which will have to define success within the context of the current impact of sanctions, the continued cohesiveness of the international community, and the threat that a no-deal presents to the Islamic Republic.

Saudi Arabia and the GCC States

In the wider Gulf regional context, the prospect for an improved relationship between Saudi Arabia, the other GCC states, and Iran has become part of the discussions among political leaders although if anything, a lowering of the temperature and some forms of non-committal levels of dialogue should be all that can be expected at this stage. Domestically, the GCC states feel that the Arab transitions are no longer a threat to their rule with no strong group challenging the legitimacy of the monarchies and with internal mechanisms in place to handle both rising opposition politics and potential extremist challenges. Instead, the key domestic issues are the transfer of power within the ruling families and the problem of persistent unemployment among GCC nationals.

Of much greater concern, however, is the crumbling regional environment, which has led to a rift in the GCC's, and particularly Saudi Arabia's relations with the United States as well as exposed the limited capacities of these countries to influence events on the ground. The deep disappointment felt regarding the perceived hands-off policy of the US on Syria, including the US veto on the efforts by Arab Gulf states to supply weapons to the Syrian opposition, has led to a complete crisis of confidence and raised doubts among Gulf officials about the continued reliability of its American partner. A direct result could be the curtailing of cooperation on counter-terrorism issues although the lack of a credible alternative external power to replace the US security role in the Gulf means that the GCC's choices are limited. As such, the GCC countries are likely to watch regional developments with increased concern and focus their attention on containing the regional crisis in terms for their potential domestic impact.

Arab-Israeli Relations

Within the regional environment, the status and impact of the Arab-Israeli issue cannot be ignored despite the inability to move towards any type of resolution with other regional issues having taken over the headlines. While the effort by US Secretary of State John Kerry to bring new momentum to the stalled peace process was seen as unique, in particular in terms of its balanced approach to both parties, the failure to show progress on key issues such as the status of Jerusalem, refugees, or the future of Israel as a Jewish state meant that another US move fell short on actual delivery. In the end, Kerry's effort was not successful in part because of the unwillingness to apply US political leverage and power to achieve its intended outcome. Consequently, the Palestinians are now looking for alternative options focusing on efforts revolving around national reconciliation and reconsidering the pursuit of further unilateral moves at the UN. In both instances, it is increasingly clear that the two-state solution is a paradigm lost.

For Israel, the Palestinian issue has been downgraded as a security issue and replaced with Iran as the only existential threat currently on the table. Overall, solving the Arab-Israeli issue is no longer seen as the key to solving other regional issues. Domestically, Israel appears stuck between the contradictions of the two-state solution and the disastrous implications of the one state alternative. And while significant changes have taken place as far as Israel's defense posture is concerned, for example the appreciation that the deterrence of non-state actors can work, the regional chaos and disintegration of the regional order is confronting Israeli officials with an unprecedented situation including the dilemma of how to protect the country from potential spillover effects.

Synthesis

Looked at from a broader perspective, the Middle East region is faced with a myriad of challenges that not only complicates the search for policy solutions but in fact makes the resolution of the present and immediate challenges highly unlikely in the short term. The erosion of leverage, power and influence of domestic, regional and external actors, the increased inability of traditional state actors to change or deal with regional events and developments, and the continued rise of non-state actors marked by their unfettered use of violence, poses the most direct threat to the regional system and the integrity of its member states. One direct result is a new approach to drawing boundaries within state borders leading to possible reorganization of the state along new lines of federalism.

As it stands, the region does not appear to have the capacity to handle these challenges, a reality that is compounded by the lack of resolve among the US or any other external actor to confront the rising sectarianism, the securitization of all domestic and regional issues, and the Middle East Cold War primarily between Saudi Arabia and Iran with all its consequences. All of the above is aggravated by the shrinking control of government authorities over societal forces leading to intense and often violent battle over the future direction of the state. To stop this downward spiral, there is a need for a grand regional conference sponsored by outside powers in order to knit together the various sub-regional elements which have at this stage fused the situations in Iraq and Syria into one political/military theater extending into the Gulf region. Alternatively, once the local actors are exhausted major external players could engage and coax those actors in the direction of compromise, making it possible for the Middle East region to move towards some new form of political engagement. For the moment, the region appears very far from being able to meet these prerequisites.

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About the author

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