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The Middle East in 2029

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The wars ravaging the Middle East are not destined to continue forever and the region is not condemned to being governed by autocrats. A transition to a more just order for the region's populations is possible, but will take time. It is unlikely to happen by 2029. Progress will be gradual, pushed by civil society. New revolutions are possible, although it is not sure they will lead to greater democracy.

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In the past decade the Middle East has experienced a historic transformation. The tectonic plates are shifting. The status quo has been shattered beyond repair. Today, there is a multifaceted struggle unfolding in the Greater Middle East, particularly in the Arab world, over the future of the nation state, the role of the sacred in the political, and the relationship between rulers and citizens. This struggle is more than territorial; it is ideological and institutional. At heart, it is an existential battle between a multitude of actors, including conservatives, progressives, Islamists, and nationalists. A fierce regional cold war between the three pivotal powers (Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) pours gasoline on this internal struggle and exacerbates it. The implications of this struggle have already been felt far beyond the region. The eventual outcome will define the character and identity of the nation states and their relations with the wider world.

Historically in the Greater Middle East and beyond, the notion of borders and boundaries has shifted in time and space. The current all-too-apparent divisions in the Arab world between national identity and tribal, religious, and sectarian identities are contentious and violent. These secondary identities have emerged because of failed state institutions and the lack of legitimacy of the ruling elites. They now threaten to wreck the entire state system.

However, redrawing the map will not, in itself, resolve the crisis facing the system. The recent experience of South Sudan serves as a warning for the violence, instability and bloodshed that can flow from such efforts. The fracturing of the territorial map is a symptom of a deeper, and more systemic, crisis of failed governance. The economic and political vulnerabilities of this failure fuel structural instability by stoking the fires of identity dislocation, sectarianism, and geopolitical rivalry.

Against this backdrop of swift and uncertain change, the Middle East state system is experiencing a profound transition. Competing visions of the nation-state and of the contract between power and the people are being promoted across the region. This will be a long, drawn-out process, the outcome of which remains unclear. This struggle to reform the nation-states of the Middle East reflects the experiences of other regions on the long, and often bloody, path to nation-building, which takes decades. It also draws attention to one of the evolving dynamics of the current struggle: the legacy of colonialism and its impact on the rise of local agency.

The political rubric of the Middle East – nation-states built by colonial powers – will likely survive and continue to be part of the region's future in 2029 and beyond, despite the sustained efforts by non-state actors who wish to replace it with something different. Even though the European colonial powers constructed the nation-states along arbitrary borders, the historical development of the region shows the extent to which these national identities have become engrained. Today, those boundaries enjoy widespread support among local communities. The turmoil in the region is therefore not about dispensing with the nation-state model, but about changing the nature of governance and state-society relations *within* these states.

From the politics of the past to the politics of the future

Across the region, people want social justice, a dignified life, and freedom from oppression. These aspirations require a political culture of tolerance, openness, good governance, and the rule of law – none of which happened under the old system. The problem is not, therefore, with the borders and nation-states *per se* but with the internal dynamics of these states: the broader failures of governance and representation.[1] The organic crisis in the Middle East is political and social. It is man-made. And it has been decades in the making. Political authoritarianism and the failures of governance are the primary drivers of the turmoil.

1. R. Khouri *in* A. Dessi (ed.), "Re-Ordering the Middle East?", Istituto Affari Internazionali, July 31, 2016, pp. 7-12.

Colonialism and foreign meddling have undoubtedly played an important role in helping sustain the current ruling order, but local post-colonial elites cannot use the past or foreign powers to run from their own responsibilities. They, and they alone, inherited the post-colonial state following World War II and they, and they alone, subsequently chose to replicate similar modes of colonial rule and control vis-à-vis their citizens. The postcolonial elites repeatedly employed narratives about the colonial past to justify their policies and authoritarian tendencies. In doing so, they carried the toxic legacy of the colonial era into the post-independence era. And then turned these anti-colonial narratives into practices of domination to silence ordinary people.

If the postcolonial elites had delivered on their early promises of dignity, prosperity and justice, the nation-state would not be as vulnerable as it is today. Instead, Middle Eastern rulers drove their countries into the ground and massively mismanaged the economies. Across the region, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, men like Hosni Mubarak, Ali Abdullah Saleh, Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, Muammar Qaddafi, and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, to name but a few, pauperized their people and turned their countries into torture states with big prisons.

In this respect, colonial borders and the religious and ethnic diversity of many of the states in the region are not the underlying causes for the present crises of the Middle East state system. Rather, the failure of political representation and the declining socio-economic opportunities are the root causes of the fragility of the state system. It is the internal software of the region (governance), not the hardware (borders), that must change.[2]

The tortured and brutal legacy of political authoritarianism and development failure is central to the region's ills. It is a legacy that has exacted a heavy toll on both states and societies, feeding extremism and even nihilism, and weakening the ties that bind a modern society together. "*Al-istibdad wa al-fassad*" (tyranny and corruption) has pauperized public life and has paved the way for populist, xenophobic, and exclusionary politics.

In the Middle East today, ideologies of intolerance and exclusion are on the rise. These corrosive ideologies poison individuals and wider society alike, and pose an existential threat to social harmony and peaceful co-existence. Non-state actors like Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and

2. *Id*.

sectarian militias peddle an alternative vision of state and society based on a narrow and exclusionary totalitarianism that sanctions identity, and ethnic and religious cleansing.

In contrast to these radical groups, those advocating ideologies of tolerance and progressive values are not well organized, and they lack resources. Western powers have not backed these progressive causes because they often clash with their wider geostrategic objectives and commercial interests. The balance of ideas across the region has therefore generally favored extremism.

The balance of ideas across the region has generally favored extremism

The current political system *must* be overhauled. Reconstructing and rebuilding state institutions on a new basis of legitimate political authority is essential. The relationship between those who rule and those who are ruled must be transformed with a new social contract based on the rule of law and citizenship. This, of course, is easier said than done. It is doubtful the reconstruction and rebuilding of state institutions could be completed by 2029. It would take at least two or three decades to lay out the formal institutional building blocks that would sustain legitimate authority in most Middle Eastern countries. Tunisia and Jordan (Lebanon to a lesser extent) might make the transition faster than neighboring countries.

Traditionally, there are two ways in which transformative change is achieved: leadership or revolution. Both are currently in short supply. The Arab Spring uprisings could have produced revolutionary change if a combination of local, regional, and global actors had not come together to thwart them. External efforts to institute change by force have also failed. They ended up creating more instability and conflict. Afghanistan and Iraq are two cases in point.

Nonetheless, in spite of these failures, there is an urgent need to reimagine a new Middle East that offers a clear break from the colonial and postcolonial eras and will act as a counter-narrative to the ideologies of extremism. This vision of self-determination and constitutionalism enshrines the rule of law and citizenship. It is consistent with the spirit of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-2012 that aspired to a dignified existence rooted in citizenship and social justice, and sought to reclaim the state from dictators.

Reimagining a new Middle East along these lines might sound like wishful thinking given the conflicts raging across the region, the dire

economic conditions of many countries, and the prevalence of extremist ideologies. But war and violence have often served as the catalysts for change. State formation in Europe was drenched in blood. The struggle for statehood lasted more than three centuries and culminated in two world wars, with millions of casualties. When the violent reverberations of the French Revolution shook France in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, observers could have been forgiven for not being able to imagine a better tomorrow.

There is nothing inevitable about the current situation in the Middle East. The region is not destined to remain mired in violence, extremism, political authoritarianism and underdevelopment. Just as other parts of the world have done in the past, the Middle East is traveling the perilous and blood-soaked journey of nation-building. We might be witnessing the painful birth pangs of a new order out of the death throes of the old one: a transitional moment characterized by civil wars and contentious social struggles.

The Middle East in the global context

Across the region, counter-revolutionary forces and authoritarian elites have won another round at the expense of those social forces struggling for change. The ability of counter-revolutionary actors to crush their opponents is due in no small measure to the support they receive from international powers like the US and Russia who, between them, either cling to the outdated status quo or fuel new conflicts to gain leverage on the global stage. But the Faustian pact these powers have struck with their friends in the old order is no longer tenable or acceptable. Political authoritarianism is not the guarantor of stability. It is the chief cause of instability in the Middle East.

During his two terms in office, President Barack Obama gave a few good speeches, especially his address on May 19, 2011, on the need for democracy and reform in the Middle East.[3] But he never translated his progressive rhetoric into serious policy. Moreover, by backing repressive regimes in the region, especially when so many Arabs were on the streets calling for their overthrow, the US played into the narrative of extremists that drives Islam-West tensions. Three decades after the Islamic revolution in Iran, the West appears to have learned nothing from the consequences of backing the Shah of Iran.

3. "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa", The White House, May 19, 2011, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov>.

The EU's view of the Middle East is equally shortsighted. European politicians are fixated on three goals: one, stopping immigration from Africa and the Middle East; two, counter-terrorism; and, three, attracting foreign investment from the Gulf, particularly in the energy and arms sectors. In this way, Western policies reinforce authoritarian politics because their focus, post-Iraq, has shifted from promoting democracy to protecting their own interests. They prefer to engage with leaders in Eritrea, Niger, Libya, Turkey and elsewhere, and to limit migratory movements from these countries in exchange for financial, technical, and security assistance from the West, rather than engage with democracy activists committed to genuine change.

For now, the drums of war are louder than the calls for reform and reconciliation. But when the guns eventually fall silent, the focus will shift to new patterns of power. Decentralization, federalism and local government: all could be blueprints for the way ahead. The political struggle is bound to be complex, messy and prolonged, but in human terms, the price of messy political compromises is much less than the catastrophic cost of civil wars.

The durability of the state system

A deep uncertainty hangs over the future of the region. However, we must be cautious about prematurely penning the obituary of the Middle Eastern state system. Although weakened and made vulnerable by recent events, the Middle Eastern state has developed huge patronage networks and influence within society.

The "Deep State" is indeed deep. It affects the lives of most of the population. The state is by far the biggest employer, with a massive bureaucracy and public sector providing jobs for millions. The security forces in particular have vested interests in the state apparatus. And because so many people directly and indirectly depend on the state for their survival, they will not easily abandon it.

As Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen descended into war, the treasury continued to pay the salaries of its employees even in areas under the control of armed rebels.[4] In a similar vein, the Palestinian authority in the West Bank (until recently at least) provides salaries for bureaucrats in Gaza under Hamas rule. This measure is designed to affirm state sovereignty and authority and co-opt people in opposition-controlled districts.

4. In the case of Libya, see F. Gaub, "Libya: The Struggle for Security," EUISS Brief, June 2013, available at: <www.iss.europa.eu> ; A. Dessi, "A Multilateral Approach to Ungoverned Spaces: Libya and Beyond", *IAI Documenti*, June 2015, available at: <www.iss.europa.eu>.

The interests of the pivotal regional powers, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, lie in maintaining the current borders and preventing the emergence of new entities. These regional powers fear that, once the "genie is out of the bottle", their own states could disintegrate. On this issue, if on nothing else, competing powers agree: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt are determined to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria. The US, Europe, China, and Russia support them on this and for the same reasons.

The Kurds learned this to their cost after they held an independence referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan in September 2017 in which almost 93 percent of the votes favored secession. Although the Kurdistan Regional Government said the referendum was not binding and did not call for immediate independence, it met with opposition worldwide, including from the Kurds' longstanding patron, the US. When Iraqi troops moved to recapture areas like Kirkuk from the Kurds in October 2017, President Trump declared "we're not taking sides in that battle", effectively giving Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi the green light to re-establish the old status quo. The irony is that Iraqi forces included pro-Iranian Shia militias, thus placing the US and its regional nemesis, Iran, on the same side against the Kurds. Following the US lead, the EU backed Baghdad's military action in Kirkuk.

No one, not the US, the EU, Russia, nor China, has the will to draw a new map of the Middle East. They recognize the dangers and risks inherent in redrawing the borders of the region and are therefore reluctant to open Pandora's box. Building a new regional architecture is too complicated. And there is no agreement on where the new lines would be drawn.

Hence, the map of the Middle East is unlikely to change by 2029. More than a hundred years after its establishment, the state system, with the exception of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, remains in place and will most likely endure. The real struggle, therefore, is *within* states: between local elites, revolutionary or reformist actors, and religious activists. In the next decade or two, the destiny of the Middle East will be determined by the pull and push of two powerful political trends: constitutionalism and new authoritarian populism. For now, political Islam has suffered a hard blow in Egypt, Syria, Libya, the Gulf and beyond. The revival of Islamism will depend on the movement's ability and willingness to develop an inclusive and pluralistic vision that tackles society's social and economic problems as opposed to privileging the sacred in the construction of national identity.

Constitutionalism

The idea of constitutionalism is steadily gaining traction across the region as a means to end the turmoil and as a way to reconfigure state-society relations. What is usually referred to as "modern constitutionalism" focuses on the production of a social order within a nation-state that has a written constitution establishing "the main institutions of government, enumerating their powers, and specifying the norms that would regulate their relations".[5] This concept rests on the belief that only within the framework of a state can any form of constitutional order be guaranteed.[6]

The concept originates in Europe but there is a long history of constitutional engagement in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt. During the 20th century, revolts and contentious politics in the region were motivated by various visions of constitutionalism.[7]

For example, in Tunisia, Libya and Algeria, groups as politically diverse as Islamists, centrists and secularists successfully concluded constitutional arrangements to begin the transition to a new order. Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the Ennahda Islamist Movement in Tunisia, is a particular case in point. To preserve the survival of his group, Ghannouchi played a pivotal role in helping Tunisia transition from political authoritarianism to constitutionalism. Under his leadership, Ennahda became the first Islamist movement in the Arab world to accept the separation of religion and politics and to enshrine the will of the people and the rule of law as the foundations of a new constitution. Because of this, Ghannouchi is a constitutional trailblazer whose actions have the potential to inspire real and lasting change across the region.

Tunisia might only be the start. There is discussion in European circles of making Jordan a testing ground for new modes of economic growth and sustainable inter-ethnic and refugee integration. The country is caught geographically between the major conflicts in Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, and has become a magnet for refugees. Already struggling to provide for its own citizens, the kingdom will need substantial external assistance to cope with the new arrivals. If this help is forthcoming, Jordan

5. M. Loughlin, "What Is Constitutionalism?", *in* P. Dobner and M. Loughlin (eds.), *The Twilight of Constitutionalism?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 48.
6. J. Wilkens, "Constructivism", *in* A. F. Lang Jr. and A. Wiener (eds.), *Handbook on Global Constitutionalism*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017, pp. 117-128.
7. N. J. Brown, *Constitutions in a Nonconstitutional World: Arab Basic Laws and the Prospects for Accountable Government*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002 and A. F. Lang, "From Revolutions to Constitutions: The Case of Egypt", *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 2, 2013, pp. 345-363.

could, like Tunisia, provide a political model for a "new" social contract and growth plan based on the rule of law, inclusive citizenship, complementarity and sustainability.

Given the dwindling resources and declining influence of the Western powers in the Middle East, there is an urgent need to focus on those countries in the region where there is a chance, however minimal, of success. This emphasis on prioritization is evident in the EU Global Strategy (EUGS), which seeks to foster state and societal resilience as an investment in good governance, stability and prosperity. The EUGS recognizes the EU's declining leverage and acknowledges that Middle Eastern states and societies may not embrace Western liberal democratic norms, or at least not in a linear, incremental manner. Instead, the EU has adopted a more nuanced strategy that targets both state and society in an effort to foster more resilient forms of governance and state-society relations.

The declining influence of the Western powers in the Middle East

In the EUGS, the central emphasis is on strengthening forms of citizen participation in decision-making and on the rule of law, both of which are considered indispensable to building resilient social contracts and improving state-society relations. The EU's tentative shift from a tendency to "preach" about liberal democracy to an appreciation of different forms and examples of citizen participation may find support amongst those in the region already fighting for constitutionalism and constitutional reform.

In the Middle East, however, constitutionalism will not be a one-size-fits-all arrangement. Egyptian President Abdel al-Fatah al-Sisi, a former general, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an Islamist politician, are the face of a new authoritarian populism now and in the coming decade.

The reinvention of authoritarian populism in the Middle East

As the elected leader of the most populous Arab state, Sisi is unabashedly antidemocratic. Like his toppled predecessor, Hosni Mubarak, Sisi has repeatedly stated that Egyptians are not ready for democracy, that bread-and-butter issues take priority over rights, that political dissent endangers the survival of the state.

The resurgence of political violence and terrorism plays into Sisi's hands and allows him to prioritize security and national unity, and clamp down

on dissent by appealing to Egyptians' sense of patriotism. The violent clash between the Egyptian state and the Muslim Brotherhood fuels Sisi's authoritarianism and sustains it. Many Egyptians see him as the country's savior because he stopped the Islamist organization from taking over state institutions. Others, however, question his legitimacy and competency.

A way out of Egypt's current predicament would be for the country to be governed in accordance with the constitution and the various pieces of legislation passed after the January 2011 revolution. Unless the country transitions from authoritarianism to constitutionalism, it faces an uncertain future, with few, if any, prospects of attracting much-needed foreign investment. The weight of evidence indicates that Egypt will unlikely transition to a more representative system by 2029. The country faces other long-term threats: the structural unsustainability of the economy, food and water shortages, climate change, a rising population, and waves of migration. If the situation does not improve soon, expect stagnation and further polarization and even new waves of social upheaval, including from the violent IS-motivated insurgency in North Sinai that has already exacted a heavy human and economic toll on the country.

Egypt is not an isolated case when it comes to the new authoritarian populism. In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is the democratically elected leader of the only secular Muslim nation in the Middle East. In recent years, he has chipped away at the independence of Turkish institutions. In this respect, Turkey's political regression is stunning.[8] From 2003 until 2010, Erdogan won praise at home and abroad for taming the powerful military. He established civilian oversight over the military and carried out economic reforms that transformed Turkey into a leading emerging market and successful global economy. But this is no longer the case. Erdogan's political ambitions have progressed well beyond these frameworks. His new authoritarianism has damaged Turkey's fragile constitutional-based democracy, plunged the country into instability and exacerbated ethnic and social tensions.

Turkey's backsliding from democracy has accelerated in the wake of the failed 2016 coup, which Turkey's government blamed on US-based Turkish preacher, Fetullah Gulen. Gulen was once a close ally of Erdogan and the AKP but the fallout from the coup attempt has resulted in a crackdown on civil liberties and freedoms, including the reimposition of the emergency rule and the arrest of some 60,000 people accused of having links to the

8. "Freedom in the World 2018: Turkey Profile", Freedom House, 2017, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org>.

Gulen movement.[9] Erdogan is determined to concentrate power in his hands and transform Turkey in his own illiberal image, regardless of the costs to social harmony and peace.

Turkey's problems are different from those of other countries in the region because it needs neither a new constitution nor a new social contract. Both are already in place. What it needs is a strong opposition to the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power since the early 2000s. Overcoming Erdogan's authoritarianism and re-establishing a system of checks and balances on executive power are thus the biggest challenges facing Turkish democracy today and in the next decade. Empowering and ensuring the independence of the judiciary and strengthening the rule of law are also important priorities.

Elsewhere in the region, in the Arabian Peninsula for example, the struggle to effect political change will be an even more difficult process. The deeply entrenched links between religion, tribe and ruling families will likely mean that the Gulf sheikhdoms will continue to be ruled as family fiefs. With the exception of Bahrain, all the Arab monarchies weathered the Arab Spring uprisings by using their financial resources to co-opt the public at home and roll back revolutionary progress in neighboring Arab countries. Nor is change likely in the immediate future. Young leaders such as the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, are as determined to preserve the political status quo as their fathers were.

The pressure will increase on Gulf rulers

The challenges facing this new generation of ruling royals are many. Their economies face a steep decline in petroleum revenues at the very time their treasuries remain over-reliant on oil and hydrocarbons to plug holes in the budget. Their populations are growing and their young people have political ambitions and aspirations. And, perhaps most seriously of all, extremist groups are ready to seize on any state failure or youth disaffection. In the coming decade, the pressure will increase on Gulf rulers to maintain their population's state-subsidized way of life against a background of declining state resources. And as Gulf rulers now have to introduce taxation for the first time, there are likely to be further demands for representation or, at least, some form of dialogue with the public. Such a move could present an opening to foster constitutionalism or social instability if the demands get rejected.

9. The figure of 60,000 arrests is taken from Freedom House; see "*Freedom in the World*", *op. cit.*, p. 7.

A regime that combines authoritarianism and constitutionalism, albeit in limited form, is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran's government is a hybrid regime that combines elements of authoritarianism and an active participatory political life under a theocratic umbrella. In this way, the Iranian system is a unique form of political authoritarianism as it provides a limited and controlled space for political competition. The Islamic Republic thus has the potential to accommodate political trends and the values of civil society as well as developing a certain level of accountability.[10] But how long the contradictions in this system can remain unresolved is open to question. In 2009, three million protesters led by the urban middle class swept through Iran, demanding political reforms. Nine years later, the severe economic problems faced by disaffected young people in rural areas, towns and small cities brought thousands onto the streets to vent their anger against a political establishment they believe has hijacked the economy to serve its own interests.

The protests in December 2017 might well have been smaller than those in 2009 but they presented a more dangerous threat to the clerical-dominated government. People living in Iran's provincial areas had long been regarded as the backbone of the country's Islamic system – nothing less than the regime's core base of support. All that has now changed. According to the Associated Press, the protests targeted the Islamic Republic itself. The crowds chanted "Death to the dictator" in reference to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and "Death to the Revolutionary Guard" in reference to Iran's security forces. The protestors also criticized the government's financial support for the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, questioning why Tehran spends billions of US dollars abroad when there are so many pressing problems at home.

The protests exposed major divisions within the ruling elite itself and between important segments of the population and the regime. As a result, the Islamic Republic could face a dangerous crisis in the coming decade: a struggle between hardliners on one side, represented by the Revolutionary Guards who have a vast business empire and, on the other, the inner circle of the Supreme Guide along with the pragmatist-reformist front of former President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami and current President Hassan

10. H. E. Chehabi, "Religion and Politics in Iran: How Theocratic Is the Islamic Republic?", *Religion and Politics*, 120:3, Summer 1991, p. 78 ; A. Keshavarzian, "Contestation Without Democracy: Elite Fragmentation in Iran", *in* M. Pripstein Posusney and M. Penner Angrist (eds.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005, pp. 63-88; A. Darabi, *The Analysis of Iranian Political Factions*, Teheran: Pajuheshgah-e Farhang va Andishe-ye Eslami, 2009, pp. 181-183.

Rouhani. In this context, the presidential elections of 2021 could be a critical moment to see if the present pragmatic trend continues or is crushed by conservative forces.

Like other states in the region, Iran faces a seismic demographic shift. Of the country's 75 million people, almost 50 million are under 40 years old. A sizeable proportion of these people want a free and open society. Many of the ideas adopted by these young people, who were born during or after the 1979 Revolution, clash with the Islamic ideology propagated by the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.[11] Because of their numbers, these young people are key to what will happen in the future.[12] Ultimately, the fate of the clerical state will depend on its ability to accommodate their aspirations. The country's future will also be shaped by regional and international developments, particularly the ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear deal, and the reimposition of punishing sanctions on the Islamic Republic. The convergence of deepening internal social discontent by the Iranian youth with economic and financial pressure by the US could destabilize the pressed regime in Tehran in the coming years.

Empowering change from the bottom up

As argued previously, rebuilding state institutions in the Middle East will take decades. Given the extent of polarization in the Arab Middle East, the most effective way to institute this change in the next decade is not to think big but to think *small*. Small steps will help create trust, strengthen national unity, and build civil society. The decentralization of power to local communities would be a good place to start. That way, local communities will have a stake in the political order. Shifting resources from the center to the regions would also help allay the fears of minorities like the Kurds who fear exclusion and who aspire for self-governance.[13]

Thinking small and building from the bottom up do not mean that transformative change should be dismissed as wishful thinking. The goal is to transform the region from authoritarianism to pluralism, from economic decline to growth, from inequality to social justice. Because sweeping reforms such as the separation of powers and respect for the rule

11. S. Karimi, "Iranian Women's Identity and Cyberspace: Case Study of Stealthy Freedom", *Journal of Social Science Studies* 2:1, 2015, pp. 221-233; A. Pejman, "The Revival of Nationalism and Secularism in Modern Iran", LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series, December 2015.
12. "The Revolution Is Over", *The Economist*, November 1, 2014, p. 6; J. Cohen, "Iran's Young Opposition: Youth in Post-Revolutionary Iran", *SAIS Review*, XXVI:2, Summer-Winter 2006.
13. D. Huber and L. Kamel, *Arab Spring and Peripheries: A Decentering Research Agenda*, New York/London: Routledge, 2016.

of law are almost impossible to realize in the next few years, the way to go about instituting change is through piecemeal initiatives and by building political and social pacts between rival factions.

Efforts to nurture resilience in civil society requires engagement with the authorities to convince them that this formula is not designed to undermine state-society relations but to deepen the ties that bind them together. Although a gradual political transition will take two decades at least, it has a better chance of success because a strategy rooted in gradualism would not threaten the vital interests of key stakeholders nor face fierce official resistance. Engagement with the ruling elite could entail providing assistance to key state institutions that foster societal resilience, such as education, health, the agricultural sector and even the central bank. The challenge is to develop capacities that positively contribute to societal resilience, while making sure that any such development does not strengthen the state's capacity to control society, an important distinction that is difficult to maintain in practice. The European Union and the United Nations are well equipped to help conflict-ridden Arab societies heal and become more socially resilient.[14]

Societal resilience and gradual political transition

The alternative to building societal resilience and engagement with state institutions is revolutionary action. As the Arab Spring uprisings showed, revolutionary action ended up empowering exclusionary groups. In Egypt, counter-revolutionary forces were able to hijack the peaceful uprising because they were better organized than the protestors. The millions of peaceful demonstrators who called for freedom, dignity and justice were no match for the established networks of the Islamists or the old regime and the deep state. The high hopes of the Arab Spring crashed on the realities of the balance of power, which favored identity-based groups and, ultimately, the military.[15]

A contrarian point of view will see revolutionary action as the only viable option to do away with deeply entrenched political authoritarianism and autocracy. Such a perspective blames the Arab Spring protesters for stopping short of uprooting the old regimes and erecting a new democratic order. According to this view, only a full-blown revolution could have produced real, transformative change and prevented counter-revolutionary

14. A. Dessì, "Crisis and Breakdown. How Can the EU Foster Resilience in the Middle East and North Africa?", Istituto Affari Internazionali, December 2017, pp.15-18, available at: <www.iai.it> ; S. Colombo *et al*. (eds.), "The EU, Resilience and the MENA Region", Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2018.
15. M. Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

forces from hijacking the uprisings. But even if revolutionary action had succeeded in toppling the old regime, there is no guarantee that the revolutions would not then have been hijacked by exclusionary sectarian groups, as happened in Libya and Yemen. At the moment, there is no cohesive social class or movement with a progressive agenda capable of carrying out a revolution and taking control of the state. Only illiberal and despotic forces can do so. And they do so to the detriment of free society.

On the whole, the Arab opposition is a mirror image of the existing despotic order: anti-democratic and insular. Opposition groups have been unable or unwilling to establish broad-based coalitions to defend a common set of values. Nor have they resisted the temptation to collude with the authorities and turn on each other. Revolutionary action will therefore most likely produce a more oppressive system than the current one. While critics might dismiss this scenario as fantastical because the present situation is so dire, it is hard to believe it could possibly get worse – but, as the rise of Islamic State in 2014-2016 shows, there is no limit to how bleak the situation can become.

For real, transformative change to happen, there have to be constituencies that believe in it and are willing to struggle and sacrifice to bring it about. Civil society in the Arab world is not yet resilient enough. Across the region, the overwhelming majority of people want change. But they are not organized or unified enough to make it happen. They lack the networks that groups like the Muslim Brotherhood have spent nearly a century developing. Yet, it is only through gradual change from the bottom up that real change will occur. The Middle East has seen too many grandiose plans imposed from the outside, all of which failed.[16]

Where the world powers *do* have a role to play is in helping to resolve the wars raging across the region, including the century-old Israel-Palestine conflict. Without outside help, these regional conflicts will continue. As stakeholders with vested interests, regional powers like Iran, Turkey and Israel cannot be relied on to act as honest brokers. The good news is that the Great Powers agree that the spiraling conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere threaten international peace and security. They also acknowledge that the only solution to these conflicts is political. As millions of Syrian, Afghani, Iraqi and other refugees sail to Europe and terrorism spreads, the West, along with Russia and China,

16. S. Colombo *et al*., "The EU, Resilience and the MENA Region", *op. cit*.

will feel mounting pressure to try to end the wars that have ravaged the Middle East.

The bad news is that the Great Powers are divided and have no clear idea how to achieve this. As a result, they prioritize short-term solutions rather than the long-term engagement needed to bring about political transition. Worse, the Great Powers have competing agendas that serve to fuel local conflicts. And perhaps worst of all, the Great Powers, including the democracies of Europe and the US, remain committed to supporting political authoritarianism as a bulwark against religious extremism. They think that political authoritarianism promotes stability when the reverse is true: political authoritarianism is the root of the problem and generates greater instability.

The region is undergoing a painful rebirth. The people of the Middle East have endured years of political violence and humanitarian catastrophes. When the fog of war eventually lifts by the next decade, the map of the Middle East will remain more or less the same. But the social contract between the people and the powerful will never be the same. The future of the region now depends on negotiating a new contract between state and society that is based on the rule of law, citizenship and accountability. The struggle to achieve this will be prolonged, costly, and uncertain. But without it, the Middle East will not change. And the Middle East cannot afford to stay the same. The people of the region have suffered too much.

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