

# Beyond Frontiers: The Implosion of the Middle East

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- Today, the Middle East as a regional system is in deep crisis. States are fracturing and are, in some instances, close to fragmentation. Some even seem to be teetering on the verge of collapse.
- The Middle East of today is a complex place to understand, and this is not helped by the fact that it is a regional system apparently at odds with itself and the rest of the world.
- Furthermore, the MENA region is suffering from an imbalance in the forces pushing for change – the peaceful mass mobilizations and the violent nihilistic ones. This is a region which is at once both *post-modern* and *pre-modern*. Both post- and pre-modern forces compete for a voice, if not levers of power, across the Arab world. Modernity as the norm for much of the twentieth century – in terms of rationality as a driver of decisions, transparent institutions of governance, rule of law, reliable public services (education, health, etc.) accountable public servants, functioning state institutions, enhancement of opportunity – has been taking a back seat in driving change in the region.
- The real tension now is between the post- and pre-modern forces. Which is which and how do we classify them? The region can be said to be grappling with post-modernity in ways that hitherto sacrosanct state boundaries are being eroded by individuals as well as sub-state/trans-state actors whose command of ICTs has enabled them to play a definitive role in articulating alternative agendas to the state's, challenging the state's previously dominant political narrative, and of course in mobilizing the masses into taking direct action. The agenda of the post-modernists tends to be, on the whole, the opening up of public spaces to social scrutiny, and the empowerment of the citizenry through the encouragement of peaceful protest and participation in rallies.
- These post-modern tendencies sit uncomfortably with the pre-modern forces now active on the scene in the Middle East. The pre-modern forces too are proactively recruiting supporters and members and are challenging the state narrative, if not the state itself. These forces have on their agenda a return to the practices and norms of the middle ages – they tend to have a black and white view of the world, aim to establish a medieval caliphate at the heart of the Arab Middle East, have unleashed violence against all in their way and use force as a tactical weapon against real or imagined enemies, they are dogmatic in their approach to life, expect total subjugation of non-Sunni peoples to their will, impose total social segregation on gender relations and subjugation of women to proscribed roles in society, have reduced education to strict religious learning only, have a medieval interpretation of Islamic law, keenly cultivate sub-state communal identities, and actively seek a division of the world into good and evil.
- Fourthly, state structures in the Middle East are too weak and vulnerable to provide a robust defence against the pre- and post-modern challenges facing it. Thus, states increasingly appear fierce, brittle, or hyper-authoritarian. At the same time, MENA states are bending under the weight of widening social disparities, debilitating poverty, high unemployment and underemployment, an energized and empowered youth, inefficient and unproductive economies, and excessive reliance on mono-commodity exports, namely hydrocarbons.
- As a consequence, the region exhibits signs of deep social trauma and crisis of identity at the state and society levels. Sub-communalization is taking place across the region, thus gradually eroding the hard-won century-old national societies that independent states forcefully but carefully put together. These 'contested' states seem to be unravelling into smaller communities of sects, religious affiliations, tribal groups and ethnicities.
- How did we get here?! I will address this question through an analysis of the region as constituted in the last century, the pressures which have been put on the states system and citizens of the MENA countries. I will consider the question through a discussion of what I refer to as 'catalytic events' which have in recent decades made the region more unstable and prone to violence.

## **Middle East is a penetrated regional system**

The overriding message from a closer examination of the region is how much the dynamics of the region have been shaped by outside intervention following 9/11 and the Bush administration's 'pre-emptive self-defence' and 'preventive war' strategies. Outside powers have played a decisive role in shaping the very geography of this region of course, defining the territorial boundaries of many of the state in question today. Indeed, the global system's regional impact has been exceptionally intense for over a century, making the Middle East more exposed than others to Great Power intervention. In fact, I would argue that due to a range of (economic, political and strategic) reasons, and the interests of others in this region, MENA has become a heavily penetrated subsystem in which hegemonic global powers have held sway for decades. In times of war and peace external forces have intervened directly in efforts to shape and control the subsystem. In so doing, the conduct of great powers has not only posed challenges to the elites' efforts to build legitimacy (state identity) at home, but also fed to saturation their pervasive sense of insecurity. Arguably, this relationship has proved to be a toxic one.

To make matters worse, due to external intervention and the power of such intra-regional forces as pan-Arabism, the region is also rather dysfunctional – it does not hang together as a region *for* itself. The Arab order at its heart is also a deeply polarized one. The Arab order's polarization has encouraged its fragmentation, arguably loosening the already fraying pan-Arab ties running across territories. This process has enabled Arab regimes of different hues to pursue their own 'national' interests with less fear of retribution from the more dominant Arab

states. Thus, by ways of examples, in the two decades following the end of the Cold War, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority negotiated their own bilateral deals with Israel; Saudi Arabia championed the land-for-peace Arab Peace Plan; the Maghreb states forged closer commercial links with the expanding European Union; Syria drew closer to the moderate Arab camp and also Turkey; Qaddafi's Libya came in from the cold and rebuilt ties with the United States and the European Union; Sudan stepped beyond the region in striking a substantial commercial partnership with China. These developments loosened the regional order and encouraged its multi-polarity. However, the region's instabilities also exposed its many actors to severe shocks.

### **MENA is a regional system in shock**

As noted earlier, a number of catalytic shocks have left a deep ingrain on the region. This penetrated region has suffered several major shocks, catalytic events if you will, in the period since the end of the Arab Cold War (1960s) and advent of 'petro-dollars', each of which seems to have left a deep scar on the subsystem. The short-lived Egyptian-Saudi-Syrian compact of the 1970s encapsulated the rise to eminence of the petro-dollar states. These states' eminence did pull in more support from the Western alliance but it did not provide them with any more protection from regional tensions or the military fires that were burning around them. However, in the twenty-first century these rather small oil states have come to play a more direct and decisive role in the shaping of the region.

In the period since the Iranian revolution, the **first** catalytic event to press on the security and foreign policies of the MENA states was the **end of bipolarity in 1990**. It was evident that the end of bipolarity was going to have a profound effect on the regional system. We saw a direct result of that in the Persian Gulf: Iraq's invasion of neighbouring Kuwait in 1990 and the destructive war which followed. End of global bipolarity coincided with the region's own growing multi-polarity, with devastating consequences. But, with hindsight, we can see that this was only a first in a set of emerging systemic pressures. Also, while the Kuwait war may have been the first manifestation of the end of bipolarity, it made a deep and far-reaching impression on the region's strategic landscape. Firstly, by pitting Arabs against Arabs, this war deepened the elites' growing crisis of legitimacy and accelerated the fragmentation of the Arab order which, of course, had already begun in the late 1970s. The fissures that Egypt's unilateral peace with Israel and Iran's revolution and subsequent war with Iraq (1980-88) had opened up widened as Arab states scrambled to protect their own interests in what was to become an US-led international war against Iraq under the United Nations Chapter Seven. The presence of Western forces on the Kingdom's soil created its own unique set of legitimacy problems for the Arab monarchies, in terms of supporting the war, stationing Western soldiers on Saudi Arabia's holy soil, assisting in the fight against other Muslims, and pouring billions of dollars into the coffers of the United States and its allies for their security assistance. But this war also spawned an anti-Western and anti-al-Saud murderous network to be become known as al-Qaeda. Just 10 years later the terror network would wreak international havoc by unleashing terror on US soil. This horrific act would be a new catalyst causing a further dramatic change in the strategic map of the region. **9/11** proved to be the **second** catalytic event following the end of bipolarity: The acts of terror had both direct and indirect consequences for the MENA subsystem. It, again, invited US-led intervention in the region, leading to two protracted conflicts (Afghanistan and Iraq) and the further destabilization of an already disrupted order. In this dynamic situation it was also the targets of US intervention which proved geopolitically decisive. In Afghanistan US action helped disperse al-Qaeda and the Taliban (across the 'greater Middle East') but also tied the West to the complexities of the South Asian regional system and unavoidable engagement with Pakistan's volatile political and security environment. And in the second war, in Iraq, American action to remove the Ba'ath regime decidedly reordered the regional balance of power.

So, the **third** catalytic event was the **2003 Iraq war** – the manner of its execution, and the messy outcome of the war. The war followed the infamous allusion to an 'Axis of Evil' of states including Iran and Iraq in President Bush's State of the Union address in 2002. These regimes were a danger to world peace and should be removed, contained, said the beleaguered American president with little foreign affairs experience. America's foes and friends alike were fearful of American policies and when it did come to war in Iraq its impact on the region was inevitably deep and extensive. Apart from the war causing utter devastation of what remained of Iraq as a viable nation-state, the point must be made that the destruction of the Ba'ath state in Iraq irrevocably changed the regional balance of power – and changed it in neighbouring Iran's favour. And the rise of a pro-Iran Shia regime in Iraq also encouraged in the moderate Sunni-majority countries the fear of a growing Shia influence; fear of an emerging overarching 'Shia crescent' as articulated by more than one Arab leader. The moderate Arab states' concern that US action in Iraq was damaging their national security was to put real pressure on US' alliance network in the Arab world, but the manner of its departure from Iraq left the neighbouring Arab states bewildered and exposed.

The Arab states, thus, has since then been trying to manage the spill-over effects of the Iraq war and adjust to the changing regional balance of power, and it is overly problematic that the regional tensions following the Iraq war have now gotten woven into the wider turmoil in the Arab region – the turmoil arising from **mass uprisings** in several Arab states. This is the **fourth** catalytic event, and deserves closer scrutiny.

### **The Arab uprisings as a critical catalyst**

Regime collapse in succession in several Arab countries since 2010 has unhinged some alliances, strengthened others, and also tested the limits of external powers' ability in shaping outcomes, controlling events, or minimizing the fall-out from the turmoil. By any measure, the Arab uprisings have proved to be the most important force in reshaping the region in the post-Cold War period. Established patterns of behaviour from the Cold War and the post-9/11 periods have been disrupted and no one, or group of powers, has successfully managed to shape the transition to suit their own interests. The prolongation of the region-wide crisis has dramatically increased the sense of insecurity within states. The regional states' behaviour, in terms of defining orientation (towards neighbours and great powers) and the subsystem as a whole has become harder to anticipate. In addition, the circulation of elites, coupled with the growing role of 'citizen power', has in the transition countries and beyond challenged the suppositions that actions are always made at the clique level in the MENA subsystem.

Thus, the process of transition since early 2011 has had a direct and dramatic impact on the policies of virtually every country in the region. Policy in the transition countries – in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen – has been hostage to the given balance of post-authoritarian political forces and the uncertainty which has accompanied the drawing up of the new states' priorities, and of course the legitimizing principles driving its 'new' policies. The uprisings have also posed serious challenges to wider interested parties – Israel, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have all had to respond to the rapidly changing regional landscape and with no guarantees of success. Moreover, the collapse of the region's security states has also shuffled the pack in such a way as to enable smaller states to play substantially bigger roles in the region. At the same time, regime collapse and inter-state chaos has created the permissive conditions for a range of non-state actors to operate in different countries more freely and directly.

Of all the so-called 'transition' countries Syria's condition continues to be an exceptional case: This is so not only because its revolution has metamorphosed into a bloody and ruinous civil war, but also for the fact that this country has, since the 1950s, played a historically significant ideological and geopolitical role in the region. The two constant sources of tension in that country – identity and geopolitics – are the tools being used by rival forces to bite away at the fabric of the state. Syria has been reduced from the most formidable regional power to a battleground of non-state fighting groups and rival states. But there is a wider point here: Can a minority-led state like Syria, at war with its own people, any longer be making foreign policy in the national interest? In the absence of credible voices how representative of the nation can the regime claim to be when it has lost much of its regional and international legitimacy? Bereft of institutional Arab recognition, how much of an 'Arab front' can the Assad regime claim?

In Egypt too we have been witness to the impact that the seesaw of power has had on that country's regional relationships – in which the UAE is one day a hostile country (under Morsi) but a close ally (under the post-Morsi military-backed government); Qatar is transformed from a desired ally into an unwelcome Arab partner. In Libya next door, tribal, ethnic and Islamist forces pull in different, often opposing, directions – to the detriment of central authority and thus leave the territory of this vast country open to outside pressures. Interestingly, it is only in Tunisia, where the whole process of change started, that we see a relatively peaceful and orderly transfer of power to more representative national political forces taking place – in which a democratic process has been augmented by the discourse of inclusivity and civil society engagement.

In a sentence, looking back, it is clear that leadership changes, as driven by street, have given central place to agency in shaping decisions and also worldviews.

#### **Intra-confessional tensions**

But beyond this, the multi-territorial Arab uprisings have also intensified intra-confessional tensions in the region, also directly impacting on state behaviour. In response to this, states are lining up along confessional lines, in which Iraq, for example, feels compelled to prop up the same Assad regime which previously allowed al-Qaeda militants to enter its territory and wreak havoc on its people. Why? Partly because this new policy fits Iran's (its ally) interests, but also because the now Shia-majority country of Iraq fears the geopolitical consequences of a hostile Sunni-led Arab regime emerging on its western border (in Syria) which could tie in more closely with the rival states of Turkey and also the oil-rich Gulf Arab countries.

Of course these new strategic dislocations are feeding into a much broader 'Middle East Cold War' which, since the mid-2000s at least, has been pitting Arab and non-Arab members of the subsystem against each other: Turkey and Saudi Arabia together in Syria but on the opposite sides in Egypt; Qatar and Saudi Arabia now on the opposite sides in Egypt and Yemen, but allies in facilitating US military presence in the Persian Gulf; Iran and Turkey on the opposite sides in Syria and Iraq, but economic partners and also sharing an interest in containing the rise of Kurdish military power. In all this the rise of identity politics is tangible. The transtate and the substate are being forged together in this new 'neo-Sykes-Pico' regional order.

#### **The toxic mix: Oil and pan-Islamism**

These new relationships owe some of their dynamic to the role of oil income, which has transformed the strategic landscape of the region. It has arguably lifted the inhibition of smallness on action in several cases, has empowered some states, but at the same time has also had an emasculating effect on others. Thus, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, oil income has given unprecedented regional influence to a handful of well-endowed Arab states, exclusively monarchical and located in the Persian Gulf, and the financial power to (economically, militarily and diplomatically) intervene in situations and lands that would have been unimagined even in the late 2000s. These countries, moreover, have so directly engaged with the new (Islamist) elites emerging in the transition states that an even more contiguous link can be made between oil wealth and the reality of political Islam in the MENA subsystem.

Oil wealth has also given a small group of states extraordinary leverage in regional and some international fora and has enabled them, in the fast-changing regional order, to pursue their national interests with much greater vigour than hitherto possible. Thus, while the oil states became eminent in the oil boom of the 1970s, it is quite possible to see that their huge oil income since the early 2000s has been aiding them to adopt a position of pre-eminence in the regional power struggle. In the fragmented MENA subsystem the Gulf sub-region is in itself already the most dynamic and the monarchies therein form the most economically prosperous and networked parts of the entire region and the weakening of the core Arab states (Egypt, Iraq and Syria), has merely enhanced the Gulf Cooperation Council's role.

The oil wealth's relationship with political Islam has also changed significantly since the Arab uprisings. Gone are, by and large, the conservatizing impetus of the oil monarchies: Qatar came out in full support of Tunisia's al-Nahda party and also Egypt's main Islamist coalition in 2011 and put its considerable financial muscle behind the anti-Assad Salafi al-Nusra front in Syria; Saudi Arabia in turn, having tried to interact with Brotherhood camp in Syria before the fall of Morsi in Egypt shifted its weight behind two anti-Assad Sunni Islamist

groups in the Syrian theatre. Iraq and Iran, as the northern Gulf oil states, adopted what could be seen as a more sectarian approach by sticking to the Shia-led (Islamist) resistance front.

Arguably then, the whole discussion of political Islam and of pan-Islamist currents has been thrown into sharp relief since the Arab revolts. The fall of the dictatorships opened up the political space for the Islamists of different hues – Salafi, Ikhwani, ‘liberal’, jihadi – to test their influence and quickly gain access to the levers of power in several important states, which has ironically ‘territorialized’ what was once a set of pan-regional movements. Today, Islamism itself has begun to change as it has fragmented and in instances polarized along geographical and ideological lines. In the case of the Islamic State (IS), what is extraordinary is to understand how an entity which has grown as an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq (which was on its knees by 2008) has risen so dramatically in Syria as to develop roots there and to spread itself in a neighbouring country to give birth to a wholly new entity which is now prizing open the old order and carving out of it a new territorial space which is at odds with both the existing regional order as well as the masters of the broader international system.

The fragmentation of political Islam is taking place along sects too. Thus, the Arab uprisings have deepened the chasm between Shia and Sunni Islamists across the region, mirroring the Sunni-Shia divide at the state level.

### **New realities**

As long as 2002 I myself and Ray Hinnebusch had argued that irredentism and insecurity remain basic features of the regional system, which meant that the policy impact of the *form* of government would be relatively limited. The core of that analysis still holds true, but there are interesting new twists to consider in the post-2010 emerging regional order. We are yet to witness the democratizing impact of the uprisings and virtually every affected country remains ‘in transition’. That said, I am acutely aware that change is under way across the region and the growing influence of non-elite groups and social forces on the direction of travel of the transition states is having an effect on many of their policies. The effect of this is also to be felt in several ‘non-transition’ countries.

Moreover, the “depoliticization of Arabism”, as some have put it, has opened up the space for not just wide ranging Islamist discourses but, even more importantly, for the secular, non-Arab, non-Muslim, and also local voices. These are yet to find their place in the Middle East’s crowded security spaces, but their space they shall find, if not today then tomorrow.

Also, it remains the case that the policies of any given MENA state can only be understood as the outcome of an interaction between state, sub/trans-state, and state-system levels. In this complex regional system, the state – for all its trappings and often impressive façade – is being contested and is indeed being reconstructed. Looking at developments since 9/11, and even more emphatically since 2011, the process of ‘construction’, or more accurately deconstruction, has – if anything – accelerated.

For some, the Arab uprisings are marking the end of the ‘Sykes-Pico’ order imposed in early twentieth century. It is fair to say that the dramatic collapse of the region’s security states has changed the strategic map of the region, but has at the same time ended the race by the established state to be the region’s ‘leading state’. Iran, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia are all reactive and even when on the offensive are in fact acting defensively. In this new theatre of conflict winners are increasingly difficult to identify and taking sides has become a moral hazard for all outsiders. We are in for a long period of turmoil and uncertainty!

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## **The Implosion of the Middle East and the Battle of Ideas**

*Response of Kawa Hassan\* to the presentation by Professor Anoush Ehteshami*

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Professor Ehteshami, Good Evening,

I would like to begin my talk by thanking the University of Amsterdam and, in particular, Paul Aarts and Umut Kibrit for inviting me to be the discussant at this debate. It is a huge honour to discuss the presentation of Professor Anoush Ehteshami! Dear Professor Ehteshami, thank you very much for your inspiring, insightful, and engaging talk. I enormously enjoyed listening to your presentation and reading your analysis. You shed interesting light on the complexities of why and how we have arrived where we are and the direction in which the region is heading. In this presentation I will address three themes, which I believe deserve deep discussion and reflection.

While preparing my discussion points, two famous quotes came to mind. One by Antonio Gramsci and one by Lenin, both of which, I believe, are very relevant to our discussion. Gramsci wrote in one of his notebooks in the late 1920s or early 1930s, during his long

incarceration in the Turi prison “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old order is dying and the new one cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” And Lenin once said “There are decades where nothing happens and there are weeks where decades happen.” Almost a hundred years on, I believe these two sentences summarize the transforming and fast-changing strategic and social landscape of the Middle East.

What we witness in a post-2010 Middle East is the end of one era and the birth a new one. This birth, like all births, is not without pains. The region continues to feel the aftershocks of mass uprisings, of which ISIS is only one, albeit very barbaric, apocalyptic and nihilistic, example. The revolutions empowered ordinary citizens, diverse social forces – some progressive, others orthodox – as well conservative rich counter-revolutionary monarchies, and regional powers such as Turkey and Iran. Consequently, any attempt to comprehend these transformations is very complex.

This brings me to the first issue I would like address. And this has to do with how we react to and engage with the transforming Middle East. And by ‘we’ I mean the global communities of academics, activists, think tanks and policymakers. Given the fact that the region is fast-changing in ways and at speeds that challenge conventional wisdom and knowledge on the Middle East, my question is: are we witnessing the emergence of new and innovative concepts, analytical tools and theories that are capable of rising to the challenge and can capture the complexities of the transformations and transitions in state-society relations and regional and international geopolitics? Or are we simply tinkering at the margins?

While the state is becoming weaker and vulnerable, are traditional international relations theories, which focus on the state as a central analytical unit, still relevant for understanding the changes in the Middle East? If the nation-state is crumbling under the weight of non-state actors, polarized societies, empowered individuals and social groups, isn’t it time to think about alternatives to the nation-state, as some experts suggest? Some experts have termed what is emerging in some countries of this new Middle East – countries like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Yemen – the ‘new normal’; that is to say, a weak state and strong non-state actors. In these cases, the traditional differentiation between state and non-state actors, I believe, is probably not very helpful, since the state itself is increasingly becoming a non-state actor, and some non-state actors are becoming and behaving like the state. So the question is, who is the state and who are non-state actors and what are the implications for international relations theories and the core issue of knowledge production in relation to the new Middle East?

Second, a related and hotly debated issue is the ‘Sykes-Pico’ order. As we know, this colonial agreement shaped the borders of states and state-society relations. Some say the borders defined by this agreement are being redrawn, others disagree. According to one expert, only the internal borders of states such as Syria and Iraq are being redrawn and not the external borders. Either way, it seems that we are in for a painful and bloody re-drawing of borders and maps. I would like to hear more from Professor Ehteshami on this theme.

Third, in the midst of the barbaric and sectarian acts and policies of ISIS, the Assad regime, regional actors and the overall violence in the region, it is tempting and easy to reduce conflicts to sectarianism. Yet, I think, even during these dark days, we should not lose sight of the real battle; that is, the battle of ideas that is unfolding in the region. The rise and prominence of ISIS and other radical groups in such a short period of time is partly the result of an ideological bankruptcy, not only in the Middle East but also in the rest of the world, including here in the west. All major state-building and ideological projects in the Middle East have failed: colonialism, the post-colonial state, communism, Ba’athism, Nasserism, Islamism and neoliberalism. We live in an *ideologyless* world, a globe without ideology, so to speak: it is either neoliberalism or the ‘Caliphate’ of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. But of course, much more is happening in the region. There are intense, heated

and lively debates in the Middle East on secularism, on the so-called civil state, and the role of religion in politics and in private life. The Middle East of today is a paradoxical place. Radicalism, individualism and authoritarianism live side by side and are engaged in a fierce – sometimes visible, sometimes invisible – battle of ideas for the future of the region. To understand the multiple dimensions of this battle we need to know more about the emerging economic, social and political cleavages and we need to make use of multi-disciplinary approaches. This brings me to the final question that I would like to ask Professor Ehteshami: Despite the current depressing and gloomy landscape, will this battle of ideas lead, in the long run, to the emergence of new progressive ideologies?

Thank you very much for your attention and I look forward to the comments of Professor Ehteshami and the audience.

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