

## Regional relations in the Middle East

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Unfortunately, specializing in Middle East affairs guarantees you a job for many years to come due to the complexities and interdependences that exist concerning the challenges and the crises that the region is undergoing. It is unfortunate in the sense that the peoples of the region are facing these challenges and crises, seemingly without respite. I will proceed by making ten general observations about these challenges and crises.

First, the Middle East could best be described today as being an anarchical regional order or a disordered regional order. Traditional rules of conduct and behavior among states concerning disagreements or differences between states, known as the Westphalian rules of conduct, are not respected at all by a number of states like they used to be years ago. Today a government of a certain state could grant itself the right to interfere and intervene directly, or via non state actors which are its allies, in the affairs of another state. It could question publicly the legitimacy of another state's authorities stating that the latter is not legitimate or that it must be changed. It is typical of a revolutionary order where ideology plays an important role in the behavior of states. This reminds us of another period in the modern history of the Arab World: the 1960s, known as the Arab Cold War, when the ideological factor weighed heavily in regional relations and was a main source of tension, crises, and conflicts among states. Such an ideological factor threatens stability and conflict management as well as conflict settlement approaches. What came to be known as the Arab Spring (that turned into four seasons as it degenerated in

many instances into wars and open ended conflicts) contributed greatly to this regional anarchy. Governments interfere directly and publicly into the affairs of other states allowing themselves to do so in the name of transnational Islamic ideologies. Iran and Turkey are typical examples of such an established pattern of regional politics. Such context allowed for the strong emergence of the role of non-state actors, themselves the byproduct of transnational ideologies that de-territorialized political actions. These non-state actors carry the flag of or enjoy the support of many states in the region. This support to non-state actors is provided for ideological, strategic or political reasons. Most of the fighting in the conflicts today is done by NSAs: terrorist organizations or sectarian, religious or ethnic ones fighting under different slogans and coming from different countries to fight under the same banner of their non-territorialized Umma (nation).

Second, the region is characterized by the proliferation of failed and failing states. Somalia can be seen as the oldest case (hence the term 'Somalisation' as a description of a failed state). Syria, Libya, and Yemen also belong to the first category. The category of failing states refers to many states with different degrees of structural problems and crises that are on the way to becoming failed states if these problems and crises are not addressed successfully. Failed states could be called sometimes 'off-shore states'. They exist abroad via their diplomatic mission and by being members of international and regional organizations, but they lack even minimal power of control and influence over society and any serious feature of stateness at home. The failed state carries two dangerous features: first of all the breakdown of the state's institutions and secondly, the decomposition of society along primary identity lines. A good example of this situation is that the Arab Spring, in certain instances, was derailed from what started as demands for political freedoms and socio-economic changes into subnational identities' warfare and confrontation. Syria and Libya are also very good examples of such a situation that was encouraged by strategic fights over the country among regional and international powers. What encouraged such fights were the societal vulnerabilities of the

country on one hand and its strategic attractiveness on the other hand. The fight in Syria today is not over which democratic model of political organization of the state to have or which socioeconomic model to adopt. It is mostly a fight in the name of Allah, the same God but from a different sectarian identity, among those who are willing to sacrifice their lives while serving directly or indirectly the strategic and other interests of Great Powers involved. The real fighting, away from attractive slogans, is done in the name of transnational solidarities reflecting identity based religious, ethnic, tribal or sectarian ideologies. The curse of the geopolitical location or geo-economic importance of a country highjack's a conflict that could be domestic and relatively easy to address, transforming it into an externalized conflict via non-state actors on the battleground, feeding into a conflict.

Third, the revival of sub-national identities at the basis of the spread of non-state actors with transnational loyalties and solidarities is a main source of chaos in the region. The revival of the Sunni -Shia divide (or what I call the Karbala paradigm – Karbala is the name of the place that witnessed the beginning of the split in Islam in the year 680) leads to a revival of sectarianism with its capacity for recruitment, mobilization and seeking sacrifice in the name of the right interpretation of Islam. This emerges as a way of reviving and re-inviting old wounds into today's politics. It facilitates the strong return of Islamism and sectarianism into the game of politics, adopted and backed by major regional powers. Those who are coming from South Asia, from Africa or from Europe to fight in Syria or in Iraq are motivated by sectarianism. If the crisis and the conflict are settled tomorrow in Syria, in Libya or in Yemen and elsewhere by an externally imposed settlement reflecting the interest of the key external power brokers, the domestic reasons of the original cause or causes of these conflicts, namely socioeconomic marginalization and deprivation, will remain and could be aggravated over time.

Fourth, there is also the crisis of the Arab state, or the failure of the national construction in the case of many states, that should have cemented a national identity by integrating while reassuring and not by assimilating through denial of subnational identities. There

is also a crisis or even a failure of the social contract between the society and the state and the need to renew the social contract in the light of the many changes that a society experiences over its history and development. In many instances, such a dual failure opened the door wide for the strong revival or return of subnational identities which were suppressed or marginalized and needed to be expressed as part of a national identity and not necessarily in contradiction of that identity.

Fifth, there occurred a dis-Arabization of the Arab regional order. A power vacuum began in the first decade of the century, immediately after the war of Iraq that led to a changed configuration of power in the region. The weakening and erosion of a collective pan-Arab identity, replaced by a pan-Islamist identity, was expressed in different political ideologies. Such a change opened the door for two regional powers, Iran and Turkey, to adopt a pan-Islamist ideology which was instrumental in their policies to project their influence in the region at both societal and state levels. Subsequently, this ideology re-shaped the regional agenda. The two regional powers came to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria from their regional collective role as the agenda-makers, as well as the role as a 'locomotive of the "Arab train"'. Iran emerged as the key power holder in the aftermath of the war in Iraq which was, in the past, the main counterweight to Iran's expansionism in the region. Iraq's strategic function changed from one of a wall, to stop Iranian expansion in the Mashreq, into a bridge for Iranian influence to reach into the Mediterranean shores. This new trend was consolidated with the changes and transformations brought by the "Arab Spring". The region witnessed the return of the two regional empires: both Turkey (the Ottoman Empire) and Iran (the Persian Empire) have been engaged since the very beginning of this change, in very proactive foreign policies. This dis-Arabization of Arab politics could best be illustrated with the example of Syria. One last observation in this respect has to do with the great interconnectedness among the different crises in the region, in terms of the strategic confrontation and cooperation among regional and external powers on the Middle Eastern

chessboard, which brings together all these crises into one great game, regardless of the differences in the causes among these crises.

**Sixth**, one must note the emergence of a 'trilogy' of wars (to borrow from the famous **Cairo Trilogy** of the Egyptian novelist and Nobel Prize winner Neguib Mahfouz<sup>1</sup>), each one feeding into the two others and feeding on the other. The first is the return of a regional Cold War, reminiscent of the Arab Cold War of the nineteen sixties. This war sees the emergence of an American-Arab alliance against Iran, with the US trying to form a sort of regional NATO, or a new Baghdad Pact, that is not easy to do because of differences in approaches on how to contain and confront Iran's influence. The second war is a war by proxy where great powers are fighting each other via their respective allied non-state actors. The third war is what we call a protracted social conflict: wars of identities or civil wars tearing apart existing states.

**Seventh**, to illustrate the dynamics of these conflicts, it is important to look at Syria, which is the conflict of all conflicts in terms of the number of actors involved and the issues at stake. The late Patrick Seale reminded us in his book **The Struggle for Syria**<sup>2</sup> about the geopolitical attractiveness of the country, for who controls Syria controls the Levant. The fight was always over who would earn the seat of Damascus among the different powers vying for influence in the Levant and Middle East. What we observe today is a game of musical chairs and shifting alliances and understandings among different powers involved in Syria. In Syria, the pattern of alliance of different powers in the South-West, on the borders with Israel is different to the pattern in the North-West or the North-East. In the Golan Heights for instance, the Israelis, Americans and Russians are on the same wave-length with the regime which would like to revive the old formula of disengagement, this time with Russian guarantees. Today's allies could become tomorrow's competitors and adversaries when it comes to splitting 'the Syrian cake'. This

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1        Neguib Mahfouz, **The Cairo Trilogy**. Penguin Random House, 2001.

2        Patrick Seale, **The Struggle for Syria**. I.B. Tauris, 1987.

applies particularly to Russian-Iranian relations. The so called Astana process<sup>3</sup> of the Russian- Iranian -Turkish 'troika' is running the show at the expense of the almost dead UN Geneva process.

Eighth, a basic remaining problem which is becoming more acute over time is the confrontation between 'the two Ds': Arab expanding demography and lopsided development. There is a need to create ten millions jobs in the Arab world each and every year to combat unemployment. As an illustration of the deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the Arab world, it is worth noting that many reports were issued in the first decade of the twenty first century by the UNDP's Arab Bureau and by many research centers and institutes, warning about the worsening structural problems facing the Arab world and the dangerous implications they could have for its stability and human development if they are not addressed properly and immediately. A UNDP Arab Human Development Report issued in 2016<sup>4</sup> indicates that 60 percent of the population is under the age of 30, with the highest regional level of youth unemployment in the world. Currently the level of youth unemployment is at 10.6 percent (almost double of the world average which is around 5.71 percent). To illustrate this problem with an example, I refer to what I witnessed in Algeria during the late 1990s, which was aggravated over time because of a dwindling return on resources on one hand and the expanding youth demography on the other hand putting more pressure on the jobs market. This is typical for most Arab countries prior to the "Arab Spring" and was aggravated further afterwards. In Algeria I could see what is called the Haytist, a French-Arab word used to describe those unemployed youngsters standing or leaning against walls, frustrated about their situation and dreaming of a way out of it usually via immigration, whether legal or illegal, across the Mediterranean Sea. Those who cannot migrate via geography to

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3 <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/kratkaa-spravka-po-astanins-komu-processu>

4 <http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/dam/rbas/report/AHDR%20Reports/AHDR%202016/AHDR%20Final%202016/AHDR2016En.pdf>

a promised and or a better future, will migrate through history, seeking refuge and salvation in a glorious Islamic past, becoming vulnerable to radical Islamist ideologies with the promises they carry. Unemployment, marginalization, and exclusion that often come together are the best path to radicalization, with all the implications such radicalization carries. Even if tomorrow a deal is reached by concerned powers to contain and settle the conflicts in certain Arab countries, the deep reasons at the basis of these conflicts, that were hijacked later by strategic confrontation over the concerned country, will remain sources of tension and possible instabilities if they are not addressed properly.

Ninth, there is a proliferation of political Islamism of different and opposing schools and policies in the Arab world. Even Arab regimes fighting Islamist movements draw part of their legitimacy from the quieter Islamist groups, whose functions are to support and confer Islamic legitimacy on the regime in their fight against Islamist forces. Most of the latter are themselves caught or involved in the geopolitical competition by regional and international powers for influence in the region at one point of time or another.

The danger that many states in the region are discovering, though a bit late, is that if you play with fire you might burn your fingers. Certain radical Islamist forces or groups used in the confrontation with enemies might at the end of the day turn against you: as many states have discovered in the region. The examples are numerous in this respect. To deal successfully with the danger of international Jihadism with all its organizations and groups, a military and security response is definitely very important and most needed but this will be addressing only the end product. One needs to focus on the different causes behind the rise of Jihadism in a comprehensive and coordinated way. These causes lie in the quality of education, especially religious education; and in cultural, social, and economic as well as political reasons, feeding into each other.

Tenth, one can observe the failure of the entire architecture of regional cooperation- the League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation

Council or the Arab Maghreb Union. Collective declarations are one thing, and policy implementation is another, leading to a loss of credibility of multilateral decisions and actions. Member states do not have a system of collective accountability concerning the follow-up on implementation of adopted resolutions, creating this gap between decisions and their implementation. The nature of the political systems of most countries, which does not lend itself to accepting accountability at home, lead and encourage such trends and outcomes. This weakens the much needed cooperation in many fields that serve the interests of all; not one state is able to face the challenges it needs to address for its progress and development alone. There is an absence of a political culture that considers cooperation as necessary.

My final words refer to the issue of trans-Mediterranean relations. We have a complex structure of cooperation mechanisms that developed over time and that were, despite some successes, not up to the tasks they were expected to fulfill. We are expecting in February 2019 the convening of the first EU – Arab League Summit, in Sharm Al-Sheikh, in Egypt. This will hopefully launch a dynamic tradition of regular consultations at summit level. The common challenges and the very high level of interdependence among the two shores of the Mediterranean is a fact that cannot be ignored or sidestepped. It is not a luxury to cooperate; it is a strategic imperative to do so around the sea that we share and the common destiny that we need to build together in the spirit of partnership.

