Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC)

The Arab Middle East and the West: where to from here?

Prof. Robert Bowker

Malta, October 2014

Med Agenda — New Series

MEDAC Publications in Mediterranean IR and Diplomacy

About the author

Prof. Robert Bowker
Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies
(the Middle East and Central Asia)
The Australian National University

Prof. Robert BOWKER

Professor Bowker retired from the Australian Foreign Service in June 2008 after a 37 year career specialising in Middle East issues. He was Australian ambassador to Egypt (2005-2008) and Jordan (1989-1992), in addition to postings in Syria (1979-1981) and Saudi Arabia (1974-1976). He was accredited from Cairo as non-resident ambassador to Tunisia, Sudan, Libya and Syria.

In the course of his diplomatic career Professor Bowker was also Director of External Relations and Public Information, and later Senior Adviser, Policy Research of the United Nations Relief and Works Program for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 1997-1998. He was based during those assignments in Gaza and Jerusalem. From 2001-2003 he was Deputy Director of Studies at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at the Australian Defence College, Canberra.

Professor Bowker was Visiting Reader at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University in 2004 teaching graduate courses on the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Persian Gulf security. He has been Adjunct Professor at the Australian National University since July 2008. In addition to teaching at the graduate level his main areas of research interest include the impact of political mythologies on Middle East politics; social and political change in the Arab world; contemporary Islam in the Middle East; Palestinian refugees; Persian Gulf security issues, and the challenges to the development of cooperative security in the Arab-Israel context.

He is the author of *Beyond Peace: the Search for Security in the Middle East*, and *Palestinian Refugees: Mythology, Identity and the Search for Peace*. His latest book, *Egypt and the Politics of Change in the Arab Middle East* was published in 2010. His most recent publications include *Ending Sykes-Picot: The Arab World and the West after 2011*, published by Durham University in September 2013.
www.dur.ac.uk/alsabah/publications/insights/no7bowker/

The Arab Middle East and the West: where to from here?

by Prof. ***Robert Bowker***

Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies
(the Middle East and Central Asia)
The Australian National University, Canberra

Table of Contents

The Arab Middle East and the West: where to from here?

Introduction

In January 2011 the Arab Uprisings brought into sharp focus a decades-long process of social and economic change that had largely been denied effective political expression in most of the Arab non-oil exporting countries of the region. Irrespective of possible political developments in the aftermath of that period, the future of most Arab countries now clearly hinges on a conundrum: in all but a few cases, reform to improve the capacity of states to meet the challenges ahead is essential, because all the alternatives are worse; but the pursuit of such reform is certain to affect long-established political, economic and social arrangements, and the privileges and interests of those who have been the primary beneficiaries of those systems.

There are too many variables attached to regional politics in the Middle East to permit one to move with even modest confidence beyond the explanatory function of social science into the far more hazardous business of prediction. Common sense requires considerable caution in foreshadowing the ways in which current and emerging issues will come together, and be addressed, by the region and its leaders in coming years.

Nevertheless, the Uprisings represent the historical moment at which the barrier of fear that protected authoritarian Arab regimes was shattered. Although popular anxiety about the future has seen a strong demand for the restoration of stability and authoritarian leadership, in general Arab governments will have little choice but

to respond more effectively to the demands for accountability and transparency which had emerged prior to 2011, and which will remain key influences over the direction of Arab political and social life.

Against that background, the aim of this paper is to review key themes and trends among developments in the major Arab countries undergoing significant risks to their sovereignty, and political, economic and social outlooks; and to consider some areas in which external parties may be able to make a positive and constructive contribution to their efforts to arrive at a more hopeful future.

It will be argued that it should be a high priority for western countries to find effective ways to support the efforts of progressive Arab reformists, and to avoid the pitfalls of engagement in the political contests that will continue among those with differing perceptions of what it means to be both Arab and modern. A further priority should be to develop programs of practical cooperation with Arab countries as they seek to strengthen their capacity to surmount the enormous economic and social challenges they now face.

The Arab Uprisings and the Arab political future

It is necessary to allow for the likelihood that for the rest of this decade countries of the region will continue to experience economic and political malaise, at best, and civil war at worst. Populist rhetoric, sectarianism and government fragility will be the dominant factors shaping the political environment in those countries where upheavals have been strongest. Constructive change in Egypt and other Arab countries, including in the political arena, will be incremental.

The starting assumption of this paper, however, is that the processes of change now under way in Egypt and also in countries such as Tunisia and Morocco will probably, within a generation, produce

somewhat more open and responsive political systems.[1] It will be argued that despite obvious difficulties, among Arab countries that have not descended into civil war the capacity to harness the intellectual energy of a more empowered political audience, and thereby to make further progress in terms of human security and economic development is more likely to improve than to regress over the coming decade. It is not unrealistic to expect that political reform in those countries will ultimately be part of the process of economic transformation, and vice versa.

The assumption may indeed prove to be false, since the political, economic and social risks ahead for the Arab countries are real. But most Arab states are middle income countries with well-established, albeit poorly-performing institutions. More transparent and empowering business, social and economic environments will help address the problems arising from decades-long institutional inertia. That process will be strengthened where demands for intellectual and personal freedoms are sustained through the courage and commitment of reformists rebounding from the reverses experienced since 2011.

Ongoing turmoil because of a reversion to the patterns of behavior witnessed under Arab leaderships before 2011 is, on balance, a less likely scenario than a gradual, and often painful, search for new and more productive dealings between Arab state and society.

Drivers of change in the Arab Middle East

The indicators of change over the past three decades across the Arab world are remarkable. In the past 30 years Arab life expectancy has risen by 15 years; mortality rates among under-fives have fallen by two thirds; adult literacy has increased 200 per cent and women's literacy has increased 300 per cent. In Egypt, contraception rates rose from 30 per cent in 1984 to 57 per cent in 2000; absolute poverty

1 Marwan Muasher, 'Not Losing the Arab Awakening' Foreign Policy The Middle East Channel, 21 January 2014, http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/21/not_losing_the_arab_awakening

fell from 52 per cent in 1981 to 20 per cent by 2005; the percentage of unmarried males aged 30 or above fell from 63 per cent in the 1990s to 45 per cent in 2006. Internet usage has increased from 650,000 in 1990 to around 11 million today. New industries have emerged: for example over 40,000 Egyptians now work in information and communications technology-based industries. There was a 30 fold increase in Arabs on-line between 2000 and 2012; 41 per cent of Saudi internet users are now on Twitter.[2]

Weighing against these positive, or potentially positive developments, however, are formidable concerns. Demographic pressures facing a region where 35 per cent of the population is under 15 and labour forces are growing by 3.5 to 4 per cent annually are a major factor supporting the case for economic reform. Less than half the Arab world's adult population is formally employed.

The demands of the growing Arab populations will have to be met amidst the impact of global warming. Annual renewable water supplies per capita across the Arab world have fallen 50 per cent since 1960, and are projected to fall from 1250 cubic meters at present to 650 cubic meters in 2025 —around 14 per cent of the global average and well below the 1000 cubic meter mark which designates water poverty.[3] According to some estimates, Egyptians may have only 582 cubic meters of water per capita by 2025.[4] The risks can only be addressed by a suite of politically challenging reforms in regard to the allocation of water domestically, and in the case of Egypt, as well as among the Nile riparian states, through revitalized economies permitting a major increase in already high food imports (which represent water in another form).[5]

2 For a more detailed analysis of the Middle East socio-economic and environmental outlook, including references for most of the evidence cited in this paper, see R. Bowker, *Egypt and the Politics of Change in the Arab Middle East* (Edward Elgar, 2010) http://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781848448650.00007.xml

3 Robert Bowker, *Beyond Peace: the Search for Security in the Middle East*, Lynne Rienner, 1996, Chapter 7.

4 *Daily News Egypt*, 21 May 2014, http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/05/21/egypt-suffers-water-poverty-capmas/

5 For excellent analysis of the growing risks facing Egypt, see Future

Significant population displacement from the Nile Delta will be caused by rising sea levels in the Mediterranean.[6] Global warming will also impact on rural communities in Syria and Jordan reliant on rain-fed agriculture and pastoral activity upon which the most vulnerable parts of the population — women, the poor and the young — mainly depend. In Gaza groundwater supplies are increasingly depleted and degraded by over pumping and seawater contamination. Urbanization, the rate of which will increase as rural conditions worsen, has seen the population in Arab cities rise from 15 million in 1950 to 175 million in 2010. At present, 45 per cent of the population of Cairo lives in slum areas.

The capacity of Arab countries to meet these challenges varies considerably. The oil producing Gulf Arab states rank ahead of many Western countries in terms of their assessed competitiveness and business transparency. But beyond the Gulf Cooperation Council member countries, there are major problems—intellectual, political and economic—which will not be readily overcome without systemic reform.

Authoritarian regimes and their supporting elements, which include not only elite privileges and vested interests but also family patterns of authority, education systems and gender imbalances in public life,

Directions International (FDI), *Death on the Nile: Egypt's burgeoning food and water security crisis*, Strategic Analysis Paper, 29 July 2014, http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publications/food-and-water-crises/1826-death-on-the-nile-egypt-s-burgeoning-food-and-water-security-crisis.html and *Conflict on the Nile: The future of transboundary water disputes over the world's longest river*, Strategic Analysis Paper 26 November 2013, http://futuredirections.org.au/publications.html

6 David Tresilian, 'Egypt and Climate Change', *Al Ahram Weekly*, 1 May 2014, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/6060/32/Egypt-and-climate-change.aspx. Even on a more optimistic scenario in which the rise in the Mediterranean by 2050 may amount to 27 to 30 cms. (see *meetingorganizer.copernicus.org/EGU2014/EGU2014-5355.pdf*) there is still a lot of population displacement to expect, as well as significant loss of industrial and agricultural production, urban infrastructure, tourism, etc. for major urban centres including Alexandria and Damietta, vital to meeting the cost of rising food imports.

will have difficulty accepting the need for such reform, let alone advocating, leading and sustaining it. Governments will almost certainly face the continuing need to adjust their policies according to the often competing wishes and concerns of military and security elements whose interaction with executive authority lie at the very core of those regimes. There is a concerted effort in Egypt, particularly, to limit the freedom of political expression by youthful, unelected political activists.

Corruption is endemic and damaging to the region's potential. According to Transparency International, in 2013 Egypt was placed 114th, Lebanon was 127th and Syria 168th in its survey of 177 countries and territories.[7] Foreign direct investment from western countries, important for the introduction of best-practice business models but heavily dependent on investor concerns for transparency and predictability of government processes has slowed. Anecdotal accounts suggest Gulf investment in non-oil exporting countries has tended to focus on such areas as equity markets and the property sector, rather than the introduction of new technologies and different business models.

In summary, the factors which could make a positive difference in this situation will take a long time to gain political traction. The cumulative effects, however, of rising levels of education, literacy, improved health and nutrition, communications technology, demands to be both Arab and 'modern', foreign direct investment by major multinational companies with business models based on the dictates of the global marketplace and management standards have produced a generation of Arabs which expects a larger voice in decisions affecting their lives. That change is irreversible.

Political and economic issues

In evaluating the capacity of individual countries in the Arab Middle East to meet the challenges outlined above, and in that context,

7 Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2013, http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results

assessing the range of possible long term effects from the events which took place in 2011, it is important to bear in mind a range of historical and other factors specific to the country in question. The determination of regimes and their supporters to push back against social, political and economic pressures for change, and the damage that may be done as a result should not be under-estimated. However some key issues of general application are already evident.

First, as mentioned earlier, in most Arab countries the authoritarianism of Arab regimes is under sustained pressure to permit a larger degree of popular empowerment. With some exceptions, the days of authoritarian Arab regimes ruling over mostly acquiescent citizens are ending.

The emerging Arab political environment contains contradictory elements and demands. In some cases, pressures for change have been contained through public recognition by leaderships that reform is necessary. In Morocco, the scale and intensity of demonstrations fell after King Mohammed VI announced constitutional reforms which would include a policy of appointing the prime minister from the leadership of the party commanding a parliamentary majority. Promises of reform have contained pressures in Oman.[8] In Jordan, the build-up of pressure for reform has been limited by the historical place of the Hashemite dynasty as the arbiter between the mutual suspicions and competing demands of the East Bank Jordanians and their Palestinian Jordanian counterparts, but demands that King Abdullah make constitutional reforms are growing.[9]

---

8 Hugh Eakin, In the Heart of Mysterious Oman, *New York Review of Books*, 14 August 2014 issue, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/aug/14/heart-mysterious-oman/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=July+22+2014&utm_content=July+22+2014+CID_bc1eba8ab62ba3339820e44782ec1d7c&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=In%20the%20Heart%20of%20Mysterious%20Oman

9 Marwan Muasher, *Reform in Jordan: After the Vote*, Carnegie Endowment, 28 January 2013, http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/01/28/reform-in-jordan-after-vote/f6fg

Second, where regimes have fallen, as in Egypt and Libya, or the authority of the established institutions of the state has been severely weakened (as in Iraq, Syria and Sudan) or where regimes were presiding over virtually failed states anyway (Yemen and Somalia) the process of building effective governments will be correspondingly difficult and protracted. Credible political leadership will be essential for that process to succeed — and it may not always be forthcoming. In Syria, prolonged conflict has undermined the institutions of the state itself, heightening the risk of Syria remaining locked into recurrent cycles of extensive sectarian violence. As will be discussed, Iraq and Syria face significant challenges in remaining, in practice, as effective unitary states.

In almost all Arab countries the constitutional and political balances, institutions, values, vision and disposition of reformed and successor regimes will take years, perhaps decades, to develop and mature. Priorities will take time to define. Interim rulers will be challenged by hard political bargaining and ideological and sectarian divisions during that process. There will be problems securing transitional justice and managing populist demands for economic benefits for those who were long denied but finally achieved political influence. Private business sectors, critical to meeting demands for jobs and economic security, will not regain momentum without a restoration of political stability and predictability.

The rise of non-state actors, especially jihadist forces such as the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq presents a concern for governments across the region. But whether IS will pose more than a rhetorical threat to conservative Sunni regimes, or to Egypt, is impossible to predict. Some jihadist activity inspired by or linked to IS's success in Iraq and Syria cannot be ruled out, but in isolation from other factors it would be very unlikely to pose a serious risk to the survival of other Arab regimes. The most important effects, beyond Iraq and Syria, might be to limit even further the prospects for much-needed political reform, and to deepen sectarian tensions and the polarization between Islamist and non-Islamist forces across the region.

Third, the next decade will probably see strongly nationalist and populist perspectives — close to xenophobia in a few cases — dominate Arab political discourse. Dealings with external parties will be more complex, difficult and subject to a higher degree of politically-induced unpredictability on both sides.

To some extent, this will be the inevitable outcome of reactions among Arab citizens against the brutality of previous regimes, which were seen as closely aligned with the United States and — in the case of Egypt — willing to maintain generally constructive dealings with Israel. But it is also a reflection of antipathy towards liberal economic policies — including disposal of state-owned assets, overhaul of banking, taxation and regulatory procedures, and encouraging foreign investment — which were advocated by reform-minded economic ministers and officials.

The fact that such policy objectives were seen as unduly and corruptly advantaging the members of the old regime[10] was all too often the results of failures in the delivery of those policies, not necessarily in the theory underlying them. The economic policies encouraged by the IMF, World Bank and other multilateral institutions were an important part of the achievement of impressive rates of GDP growth —an annual average of 5 per cent from 2005 to 2010 under Mubarak.[11] But they also masked the social reality of unemployment, which was over 20 per cent among Egyptian youth even during the high growth rates of the first decade of the millennium.

Alongside the quality of political leadership, and continuing stability and predictability in dealings between Egypt

10 Amr Adly, *The Economics of Egypt's Rising Authoritarian Order,* Carnegie Middle East Center, 18 June 2014, http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/06/18/economics-of-egypt-s-rising-authoritarian-order/hdzr#

11 *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 February 2014, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2014/0213/Egypt-makes-big-economic-push-as-leader-in-waiting-Sisi-courts-Russia

and Israel, economics are the key to the short term regional outlook. Coming on top of an extended period of policy paralysis, unproductive populist political demands may further distract focus from achieving economic policy coherence and hinder the emergence of progressive political leadership. If economies fail to gain traction fairly quickly in the states undergoing upheavals, however, disillusion with the political and economic dimensions of the reform process will grow.

Far-reaching economic reform, in conjunction with a stronger focus on equity issues and social safety nets, will remain essential to meeting the needs and aspirations of Arab populations.[12] However it may take several years before the economic policy parameters and economic performance of the countries concerned offer a reasonable prospect of generating and sustaining the resources required for domestic structural adjustment.

In the meantime, Egypt and other Arab governments will be seeking affordable international funds to bolster domestic expenditure. They will be doing so while under intense political pressure to insist upon clear national control over the direction and deployment of such external assistance as donors and lenders may be willing to provide.

Although Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates so far have been exceptionally forthcoming and sympathetic to the immediate challenges facing Egypt, among Egyptian political circles the idea of abiding by the requirements of external institutional lenders, especially the International Monetary Fund, in order to build a more secure economic future has already encountered strong and sometimes ill-informed resistance.[13] Moreover, if large-scale financial

12 Mohsin Khan, *The Economic Consequences of the Arab Spring,* Atlantic Council, 13 February 2014, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/the-economic-consequences-of-the-arab-spring

13 The well-regarded finance minister of Egypt's interim government resigned in July 2011 following the sudden reversal by the military authority of a proposed agreement with the IMF on a $3.5bn structural adjustment loan. According to media reports, he said the policy making environment had become confused. ("People don't know what they want (he said). Do they

support is to be sustained, institutional lenders and Gulf donors will be increasingly hard to placate on issues of conditionality. And governments in western donor countries will be sensitive to the political stance of Egypt and other borrower countries on issues such as Israel and the Middle East peace process.

Civil society, values and the politics of social change

Fourth, for Arab political culture to change, and for political, economic and social reform leading to a new era to be durable, the core values of Arab society will have to be rebooted by Arabs themselves.

Like much (but not all) of the Arab world, Egypt is stuck somewhere between the decline of an authoritarian order and the emergence of an inclusive, empowered model of Arab modernity.[14] There are no easy answers to the disconnection between privilege and poverty, or to the fact that Egypt is in reality a collection of micro-societies, of which the 'elite' is just one element (and a multi-faceted one at that). And for all its distasteful aspects, it is from within the elite that the vision and driving force for progress will remain, alongside the enduring elements of corruption, self-satisfaction, apathy and fear of open-ended change that have brought about the political crises of the past few years.

Democracy in Arab countries will not be built upon the salon society of elites and the Internet. The driving force behind demands for change in Egypt and Tunisia has come from well-educated youthful activists, many of whom are attuned to the technology and values of the populations of successful Arab countries in the Gulf and beyond. But being mostly middle class, often foreign educated and intellectually liberal, their connection to the less well-educated and socially conservative parts of their own societies is weak.

---

want increased expenditure and no borrowing from abroad?").

14 Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Whatever happened to the Arab Spring?' *Al Monitor*, 17 December 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/arab-spring-three-years-later.html?utm_source=&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=8755#

Around one in five Egyptians is illiterate.[15] Nor is it possible to change national education systems to encourage values such as critical thinking without addressing a far wider range of issues, including the social status and remuneration of teachers and pedagogical approaches, and in all too many cases the absence of role models for students to follow. Social and family receptiveness to ideas which may challenge long-established beliefs, authority and privileges will develop only gradually.

We may expect to see a younger, but poorly-organized generation of reform-minded Islamists who focus on Islamic principles pitted against followers of neo-traditional versions of Islam, including increasingly vocal salafist political streams taking a Saudi-inspired, puritanical and literalist approach to Islamic scripture.[16] Both the conservative forces within the Muslim Brotherhood and the salafists are sceptical or largely unconcerned about external reactions to their approaches to both social and foreign policy matters.

Among a population where 72 per cent of young Egyptians believe an enriched spiritual life to be essential (compared to 53 per cent of Jordanians, and 38 per cent of young Syrians)[17] neo-traditionalists can appeal to notions of promoting a conservative Islamic identity as an authentic response to social and economic insecurity and western-backed Arab reformists' demands for change. The challenge will be for progressive-minded Egyptian reformists, both Islamist

15 *Egypt Independent*, 8 September 2013, http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/capmas-more-16-million-illiterate-people-egypt-2012

16 Raihan Ismail, 'Contesting Political Islam in Egypt', in Adel Abdel Ghafar, Brenton Clark and Jessie Moritz (eds.), *The Contemporary Middle East: Revolution or Reform?*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2014 pp. 89-109.

17 Silatech , *The Silatech Index: Voices of Young Arabs June 2009*, Doha: The Silatech Knowledge Consortium in partnership with Gallup Inc. A Gallup poll in 2007 found that 64 per cent of Egyptians believe that *sharia* should be the only source of legislation. 97 per cent of Egyptians surveyed associated *sharia* with justice for women.

and secular, to surmount, or at least survive, the pressures that have arisen against the linking of Islam and political activity since 2013.

Arab political and social reform and the West

The Arab Uprisings were not focused on social issues, nor were they envisaged, among most of those involved, as part of a process of changing Arab societal values and institutions. The tectonic plates of Arab society are shifting, but there is no consensus about the desirable direction of social change.

As the political situation in countries most affected by the Arab Uprisings matures, however, there will emerge a contest of ideas concerning how civilized Arab societies should behave. Donor countries wishing to see their values respected, and hopefully admired, in the emerging Arab world have significant foreign policy and security interests at stake in that debate.

In the hubris of the new era, however, a high level of suspicion surrounds the perceived involvement by foreigners, or individuals closely associated with external parties, in the strengthening of Arab political institutions. This is the case even where change has already been taking place from within, and where reform of traditional values and practices has long been recognized, by Arab intellectuals, as overdue. Foreign-sponsored programs directed at engagement with Arab civil society, including support for sectarian bridge-building and national reconciliation efforts following bouts of turmoil or conflict have an associated risk of generating accusations of external involvement in domestic politics under the guise of supporting human rights.

Programs intended to support those organizations whose values are, at least ostensibly, democratic will inevitably involve highly subjective judgments about their short and long-term commitment to that goal; the likely extent of the resistance of Arab governments to widening effective political space to the advantage of organizations

and interests beyond their control, and the degree to which civil society groups will adhere to values of political openness and accountability. Achieving coherence between secular and Islamist groups, and advocating a realistic balance between demands for predictability and demands for change will be ongoing political challenges.

The assumption that a strengthened civil society will lead to democratic change in the authoritarian Arab context is itself questionable. It is clear that in the coming few years, reformists in both Islamist and secular parties will need to be more active and effective in seeking to capture the political imagination of the emerging Arab middle class. However Arab civil society is not necessarily either civil or liberal in a western sense. Within its overall umbrella a range of groups and movements, with radically different values and ideologies — not all of which are either democratic or inclusive in regard to the concerns and interests of others — cooperate, compete or are marginalized by regimes.

Beyond the ranks of NGOs seeking financial assistance and/or hoping to secure external pressure on their own governments, there is no obvious rationale, from an Arab perspective, for Western involvement in strengthening Arab governments and civil society. That scepticism extends to those western governments and institutions offering to support election training and monitoring projects with the aim of achieving reforms or capacity building at the systemic level. While opportunistic interventions may be made through embassies and government aid agencies, efforts at a programmatic level to engage Arab civil society are better left, at least for the next few years, to those Arab countries which are willing to accept that external engagement in such programs is both feasible and necessary.

Over time, amidst rising rates of literacy and wage-based employment for women, and the demonstrated success of countries such as the UAE in raising the social horizons of a generation wishing to be both Arab and modern, those advocating reform, including from

a progressive Islamist perspective, will have a greater chance of shaping social and perhaps, in the longer term, even in respect of political outcomes. It is still reasonable to expect that the majority of Arab political systems will probably evolve, through their own efforts and in keeping with a broader desire to be regarded as both Arab and modern, in ways which manage to achieve a reasonable balance between progress and stability. On the donor side, however, only countries which have the leverage, country-specific expertise, and determination to promote such programs by committing the very considerable resources of time and funding required would be capable of having a positive impact at the systemic level.

Western strategies and constraints

Practical Western responses to the unfolding of developments in the Arab countries over the coming decade will vary according to the needs of each country or partner or group involved, as well as the willingness and capacity of western governments to engage with their Arab counterparts in this area. The comments that follow address some of the major uncertainties in regard to the countries of current concern.

Egypt

Beyond the headline issues of civil wars in Syria and Iraq and conflict in Libya, much of the focus of analysis and policy debate concerns Egypt. That is appropriate. One in every four Arabs is an Egyptian. The processes unfolding in Egypt will have a significant impact on the aspirations and expectations of the generation of Arabs which will dominate the political life of the region's non-oil exporting countries for the next couple of decades. Egypt also has the largest strategic capability of any Arab country; the Arab world's third largest economy, and great impact on popular Arab culture. The predictability of the relationship between Egypt and Israel is a key foundation stone of regional security. It is of central importance to the regional political and economic outlook.

It is possible to see a deepening crisis for Egypt as it confronts a fragile economy demanding urgent remedial action in regard to such distortions as fuel subsidies, faces ongoing political, social and generational differences within its population, and struggles to find a durable balance between stability and political reform. However, it is also reasonable to argue that at this juncture, these challenges, though formidable, are capable of being addressed to some degree by effective political leadership backed by external financial support.

According to official statistics Egypt at present has an official unemployment rate approaching 14 per cent. Almost 70 per cent of the unemployed are aged between 15 and 29, and almost 80 per cent have diplomas or university degrees.[18] Youth unemployment reportedly exceeds 30 per cent; indeed in April 2013 the Egyptian State Information Service Arabic website suggested Egyptian youth unemployment stood at 77.5% (and among educated youth 85.4%).[19] The social implications of the unemployment phenomenon, including its impact on marriage and family relationships, aspirations and creativity, however measured, are very important indeed.

The unemployment problem is accentuated by a growing demographic challenge. An Egyptian born in 2000 among a population of 65 million will be living among an estimated 137 million people by 2050. That population will begin to face problems of ageing as well: from around 5.1 million Egyptians over 55 years of age in 2000, ways will have to be found to deal with 32 million over 55 by 2050.[20] Both the youth bulge and, within the next decade,

---

18 *Ahram Online*, 22 July 2014, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/106862/Business/Economy/More-than-,-foreign-workers-left-Egypt-in--CAPMAS.aspx

19 See http://www.sis.gov.eg/ar/LastPage.aspx?Category_ID=19 See also *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 February 2014, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2014/0213/Egypt-makes-big-economic-push-as-leader-in-waiting-Sisi-courts-Russia

20 Data extrapolated from U.S. Census Bureau statistics http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/idb/informationGateway.php

the ageing situation present unprecedented social, economic and political challenges.

External parties seeking to participate in shaping the process in Egypt through which contending ideas about modernity are played out risk disadvantaging those who advocate the values most western countries would wish to see prevail. The United States is under attack in Egypt for allegedly having an agenda of supporting the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood after 2011, when in reality the US approach was more simply intended to recognize the need for political reform, and to work with the government of the day in pursuit of US interests where Egypt was involved. Going forward, Egypt will be sure to reject external assistance for civil society organizations unless the disbursement of such aid is approved beforehand. Similar limits and political constraints will apply to external engagement in project activity and debate linked to gender issues and other sensitive social values and practices.

Syria

Although undeniably gloomy, the outlook for Syria over the remainder of this decade is almost impossible to forecast with any degree of confidence. Despite efforts in the last three decades to build a non-sectarian secular national culture, those tensions certainly came to the fore as the authority and repressive power of the Syrian state weakened. The future for Syria depends on whether the security forces, dominated by the minority Alawites, remain firmly behind the regime; and whether the risk of territorial disintegration of the country comes to fruition, either informally or in some more concrete fashion.

As with the Lebanese civil war, the Syrian civil war is most likely, eventually, to de-escalate through exhaustion of the domestic participants. Only at that point might we begin to see a winding back of their support from across the region, and some prospect of internal and regional parties arriving at a stand-off. The conflict will

not be brought to an end through a political solution, or an outright military victory.

Meanwhile, so long as the centre of gravity of the Syrian regime remains intact, an Alawite regime, under Iranian protection, is likely to survive in Damascus and the western urban areas of the country. Bashar al-Assad is unlikely to front the International Criminal Court, nor will he be welcome in Riyadh, at least until generational changes take effect, and a substantial reason for inter-Arab reconciliation emerges.

There is no articulated, credible political strategy to identify and promote western interests in Syria. Assad is not morally fit to remain as president. But a convincing linkage between securing an acceptable outcome and arming Syrian rebels has not been made. Arming 'moderate' rebel groups in Syria to fight both the regime to bring it to the negotiating table; and, somehow, the trans-national IS, without a determined effort to reach out to the Alawites escalated the level of violence and, in turn, re-inforced the regime's message that the Alawites and their supporters faced an existential threat. It actually helped to stabilize the regime, not weaken it.

In the absence of articulated goals and coherent strategies to achieve them, much of the policy debate over Syria has in fact been an extension of US domestic politics, directed against President Obama, rather than a genuine contribution to the exploration of policy choices. And some of the wisest efforts to contain the problem – including efforts by Kofi Annan to bring together the major countries involved, including Iran; and US efforts to engage the Russians at the outset of the conflict– went unheeded for reasons unrelated to the Syrian issue itself.

The Syrian policy dilemma is accentuated by the risk that any major military advances the Islamic State (IS) makes henceforth — and Aleppo is a potential high value target in that regard — will give it a degree of following among its jihadist rivals that will render 'moderate' forces largely irrelevant. Unless the trends of the past few

years are reversed, the survival of the Alawite regime may represent the only realistic approach to avoiding the consolidation of jihadist forces (whether IS or Al-Qaida-dominated) antagonistic to western interests in much of what is now Syria.

Western countries need to have a realistic recognition of the Assad regime's military prospects and chances of continuing Iranian support, both directly and through Hezbollah. Iran is not going to lose its capacity to protect its interests, in Syria or in Lebanon, or in Iraq. Nor has the political, public and intellectual mainstream of any western country been willing to countenance boots on Syrian soil. Whether or not it was true at the outset of the conflict, a collapse of the Syrian regime anytime in the near future would also see massive ethnic cleansing and population displacements directed against the Alawites, other minorities and those who have backed the Assad regime, not only in Syria but also in Lebanon.

Unknowns at this stage include whether the Assad regime would have the financial capability to sustain itself if its oil fields were to remain under the control of Islamist separatists; and whether the opposition can surmount concerns that regime collapse would lead to extensive sectarian violence between Sunnis and Alawites. Violence along those lines is a distinct possibility because of deep-seated socio-economic disparities and historical animosities between the two groups, especially in the north of Syria. A breakdown of the authority of the regime has also had negative security implications for Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

Iraq

Urban areas where the control of the government of Iraq has been lost will be very difficult to regain without massive destruction, and probably large-scale sectarian violence in other mixed Sunni and Shia areas. It is unlikely Iraq can resolve this problem on its own. It is also unlikely that external interventions will enable it to do so. The most likely outcome in Iraq is a failure *either* to maintain a

unitary state, *or* to achieve a decisive separation into two or three new entities.

The Kurds will probably be able to prevent serious military incursions by the Islamic State (IS), which is more likely to concentrate on securing its grip on Sunni Arab areas. The Kurds could perhaps also withstand military pressure from the Government of Iraq. Iran is unlikely to make a strategic commitment to back a campaign by Baghdad to regain control of the Kurdish region—an undertaking which would be more challenging than Saddam's repression of the Kurds after 1991, and before that in the al-Anfal campaign in 1988 at the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

The Kurds may eventually break away to form a state of their own, with almost complete economic dependence on Turkey. But that depends on being able to sell their oil on the global market, and they will continue to face a serious potential threat from IS. Their approach may be to hold out the threat of secession in order to bargain for the right to sell their own oil in the first instance—thereby weakening the notion of a unitary state still further; to cooperate against the threat from IS, and to reserve their push for independence to a later stage.

Turkey has avoided open endorsement of Kurdish independence rather than Iraq remaining a unitary state. But there is little doubt the Turks could live with such an outcome so long as it did not inflame secessionist demands within Turkey itself. Kurdish treatment of the Turcomen in Kirkuk will also shape Turkish approaches to the issue of Kurdish statehood.

It is unclear whether, or at what point, the United States might accept a Kurdish state rather than preserve the fiction of a single Iraq. Iranian attitudes are also unclear, but Iran also is not yet willing to endorse Kurdish independence. Because of its own Kurdish minority, Iran will also have interests in the outcome that both the Kurds and the Turks will need to take into account.

The Sunnis in Iraq will be more inclined toward a rebalanced power sharing arrangement with the Shia than to seek a Sunni state. A Sunni state would be less viable than a federated one that enabled wealth sharing with Shia and Kurds — and sometimes even delivered on it. A Sunni state not in control of Baghdad, and possibly also not in control of Mosul, would be inconsequential in the Sunni Arab world. It would be a major blow to Iraqi Sunni identity and history.

The overall Sunni focus — and the preference of the Saudis and other Gulf Arab states — will mostly remain on promoting a more equitable sharing of political power in Iraq between Sunnis and Shia, and easing the grip of Baghdad in predominantly Sunni areas, rather than on seeking a Sunni secession. The Sunni tribes, Sufis and Baathist remnants do not have the military capability to defeat IS outright and the temporary success of the uprising/*sahwa* against al-Qaida backed forces in 2006-2008 depended on US military backing that will not be available again. Nor will the Sunnis fight without credible assurances of amnesty for those who have rebelled against the Government of Iraq beforehand, but who refuse to promise allegiance to IS.

Terrorist attacks aside, the Iraqi Shia are probably not at serious risk from IS unless the government in Baghdad collapses or the Iraqi military and the Shia militias fail to measure up to the challenge. Neither of those dire scenarios seems likely. The Shia have economic security because of oil. They have Iranian protection and competent (thuggish) militias with which to defend themselves. If the military situation worsens, they could negotiate a new deal for the Sunnis.

However regaining and sustaining territorial control of Mosul and other cities for Baghdad would only be possible on the basis of a credible power-sharing deal with the Sunnis, who the Shia would rather see subjected to greater central control than given more autonomy. In other words, the Shia have little reason to fight to reassert control over the Sunni north—and then follow through on promises to cede power back to the Sunnis, whom they do not trust.

The Sunnis can make the same calculation about the intentions of the Shia.

Iranian support for effective re-unification would be unlikely to be forthcoming unless the Iranians decided their interests were seriously jeopardized, not merely inconvenienced, by IS and the Kurdish push for independence: for example, if the Kurds showed an inclination to develop closer ties with Israel or the United States. Otherwise, depending on how events unfold, the Iranians may see their interests as best served by preserving their influence over a weak Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, or over a newly-emerged Shia state, and using their political, economic and strategic leverage to protect their interests so far as the Kurds are concerned. They are unlikely to see their interests lying in committing significant resources—and possibly over-reaching—trying to preserve the reality (as distinct from the polite fiction) of a unitary Iraqi state.

The prospects for the IS playing a major part in the future of Iraq and Syria should not be under-estimated. Its future depends on its military performance, including its image-building skills, and overall momentum. It seeks to position itself, through a mixture of activism and coercion of its potential challengers, as more successful than AQ, and more credible in the defence of Sunni interests than the mainstream Iraqi Sunni political class or the Sunni tribes.

IS has yet to face the challenges of a more concerted military campaign against it, using improved US-backed command, coordination, intelligence gathering and surveillance and logistics, as well as Iranian assistance to the Shia militias and the more effective use of air power. But it is strongly motivated, well-resourced and tactically sophisticated. The failure to recapture Tikrit from IS shows it will be extraordinarily difficult to remove from those urban centres it now controls, in both Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State aims to articulate a vision which motivates and provides a sense of identity that rejects established (temporal) authority and jihadist alternatives. The so-called 'dignity of jihad' has

appeal among the young, alienated and frustrated seeing themselves as humiliated and powerless, and seeking an alternative solution to their problems. To those who subscribe to the cause, it offers a sense of empowerment, and a divinely-sanctioned opportunity to fight with a moral purpose.[21]

The Islamic State's reading of Islam is narrow and self-serving. But while not neglecting the need to defend itself in theological debates, it aims to tackle theological disputes from a position of strength on the ground. It accuses its Sunni detractors of pursuing power and delaying obligatory action for their own purposes, and draws upon both in-principle acceptance of the notion of a Sunni caliphate, and long-standing condemnation by Sunni *ulema* of the Shia as heretics. Both notions enjoy popular appeal (albeit restricted to some degree in Iraq by the unusual extent of Sunni-Shia intermarriage).

The structural problems facing the future of any government run by the IS (which is not interested in power-sharing compromises) and its cruelty probably reduce the amount of time the IS has to achieve military successes before its appeal begins to wane. But its violence may not have much negative effect on its military performance. Unpopular as it may become, the IS looks likely to be a major player in the region for the foreseeable future.

Western responses

A Sunni controlled area straddling western Iraq and northern Syria would represent a long-term threat of terrorist activity, mostly within the region. It would add, inevitably, to the risks faced by western countries to which at least some jihadists will return in due course. The issues of how the United States and others should respond, and might be able to respond, however, are very problematic.

---

21 Jonathan Githens-Mazer, Rafael Serrano, and Trahaearn Dalrymple, 'The curious case of the Tunisian 3000', *openSecurity*, 19 July 2014, http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/jonathan-githensmazer-rafael-serrano-trahaearn-dalrymple/curious-case-of-tunisian-3000

The starting point for consideration of whether and how western countries should respond is to arrive at a clear understanding of what such policy decisions were trying to achieve. If the origins of the present crisis arose essentially because of the sectarian (pro-Shia) policies of the Maliki government, an intervention involving military means in its support without prior establishment of a more equitable power-sharing arrangement between the Sunni and Shia (and Kurds) would be likely to exacerbate Sunni resentment against the United States. It would be seen at the popular level in Iraq and across the Sunni Arab world as a case of US collusion with the Iranians to prop up an inequitable Shia regime, and would contribute nothing toward achieving a durable solution within the Iraqi context.

It is also important to bear in mind that by intervention western forces in intense urban warfare would almost inevitably produce massive levels of civilian casualties and destruction of urban infrastructure, as seen in Syria. Significant casualties among the combatants would be likely. The experience of the fighting for Fallujah during the US surge, and its subsequent loss to the jihadists, shows also how difficult it would be in practice to win military control over urban areas where there is a serious level of resistance and where superiority in conventional capacity including air power is not much use. It also underlines the difficulty of remaining in control of such areas as internal political dynamics come back into play.

To be effective, an intervention in Iraq would also need to address the problem that IS now operates across the Iraqi-Syrian border, and its position in Iraq will be reinforced by the financial and other benefits it gains from its grip on urban centres and oil production in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour. Few countries would be willing to countenance the military and political hazards of putting boots on Syrian soil in order to address the situation in Iraq; but that would almost certainly be required. No western or Arab country is ready either, at this stage, to consider a strategy which would involve cooperation with the Assad regime against IS.

Without a truly credible political strategy in place for a military intervention to support, and willingness to commit very significant levels of resources to such a conflict, we are unlikely to see a combat-capable western military intervention in Iraq. Meanwhile, as mentioned, IS is potentially a formidable problem for a long time to come, even if it is contained, with Iranian assistance, by Shia forces in Iraq, and by the Assad regime in Syria.

Other Arab states

Having removed all vestiges of the former government, **Tunisia** has made impressive progress in the task of reconciling competing secular and Islamist visions of the country's future. **Morocco** has been at the forefront of moves to pre-empt pressure against the monarchy by introducing constitutional reforms, and continues to draw upon a high level of traditional legitimacy in conservative Islamic circles because of the monarchy's ancestral ties to the family of the Prophet. **Algeria** has foreshadowed but been reluctant to introduce political reforms, and continues to present itself to its domestic audience as preferable to a possible Islamist takeover. Having reportedly lent support to the Ghaddafi regime out of concern at the potential for a resurgence of the Islamist opposition in Algeria should the Libyan regime fall, more recently it has been active in supporting the security of Tunisia against the threats posed by the breakdown of the Libyan government.

Libya is struggling to overcome the chaos which followed the removal of the former regime. It is certain to remain politically fluid, with an information scarce and largely opaque operating environment posing multiple dilemmas from a policy perspective. The extent to which its ongoing conflicts among militia groups impacts upon the population is very difficult to gauge.

Although **Yemen**'s political leaders reached agreement under Saudi pressure for a transition from President Saleh to a successor regime without collapse into all-out civil war, the fact remains that the traditional patronage-based system in Yemen is breaking down, with no obvious substitute. The Friends of Yemen grouping comprising key western and Gulf states, formed in 2010 to address the political

and economic conditions that benefitted al-Qaeda, has had little success in seeking to link aid to government performance.
In none of the cases mentioned is it possible to forecast with any confidence what the political future may hold, although neither is there any reason to predict regime collapse within the coming four years.

Priorities and mechanisms for Western engagement

Aid funding in the Middle East by UNDP, USAID, the EU and the World Bank falls into three categories. The first is a program of short term assistance – mainly humanitarian aid – for regions affected by revolution. The second is 'transitional aid' – aid and development programs focussed on bringing the countries where uprisings occurred through a peaceful transition to democracy, including initiatives to ensure free elections and anti-corruption safeguards. The third category is aid with long term humanitarian objectives — eradicating hunger, improving employment, and improving health and education. There are also economic programs being pursued, in particular, by USAID and the World Bank which are designed to bolster the entrepreneurial Arab middle class with the aim of stabilising and strengthening economies in the longer term irrespective of political developments.

Often chaotic in their approach but always anxious to ensure their sovereignty is respected, Arab governments will seek external support, but will also remain, for the most part, highly resistant to externally-driven pressure or advice to change. For the Arab countries offers of 'cooperation' (not 'development assistance'), will be appraised in part according to their real or imagined implications for their overall control of the delivery of such programs. Under scenarios of Arab success or failure alike in the struggle to establish their domestic authority, outsiders will have no choice but to work within existing institutional systems.

It is also important to remember that with only a few exceptions, Arab states have long possessed the government institutions and

processes of most middle income developed countries. For donors, this means having to take a selective approach, largely directed towards the strengthening of institutional capacity and functionality within Arab countries. In the meantime, bureaucracies will be determined to preserve their role, and government employees will often be concerned to protect the economic and other benefits they have secured within existing systems, however inadequate or dysfunctional those systems may seem.

At the sub-national level, poverty in the Arab region is heavily concentrated in rural areas. In 2005, the rural population of Arab countries represented about 41 per cent of its total population, or some 130 million people. As noted by the *Arab Human Development Report* 2009 and other reports,[22] the majority of this rural population (94 per cent) is distributed among the lower-middle income groups. One would therefore expect to find significantly higher rates of poverty in rural areas.[23]

While accepting that extended periods of weak governments and economic and social policy paralysis are very likely, as a general rule western donor governments would be likely to expect that the end results of their support for Arab governments should have measurable

22 UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report(s) 2002-2009*, New York, United Nations Development Program. http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/regionalreports/arabstates/name,3140,en.html See also the *Third Arab report on Millenium Development Goals 2010 and the Impact of the Global Economic Crises* (UN, 2010)

23 Poverty headcount and poverty gap indices for rural and urban areas (using the national lower poverty line for seven Arab countries) before 2011 show that the rural-urban divide was highest in Tunisia, followed by Morocco, Egypt and Yemen where the ratio of rural to urban poverty was 4.9, 3.0, 2.9 and 1.9, respectively. Moreover, the poverty gap ratio, which measures the average distance separating the poor from the poverty line, was evidently higher in rural areas of all Arab countries. Using the yardstick of the upper poverty line, rural areas in Syria were slightly poorer in 2007 than they were in 1997. In Egypt, the ratio of rural to urban poverty and the rural poverty rate increased significantly over the period of 2000-2009, despite economic reforms introduced in the decade before 2011.

impact in terms of assisting vulnerable groups during transition and in conflict; and support post conflict and peace building activity.

Where security and political conditions permit the establishment of comprehensive programs of assistance, the aims of most such programs will continue to be the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, to increase education and employment, remove the gender divide and empower women, and to implement environmental sustainability and health initiatives with the objective of reducing child mortality and combating diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Improving access to finance for small and micro enterprises will be a key concern. Also important will be building national capacity to help stabilize areas affected by terrorism while mitigating the appeal of insurgent recruitment efforts.

It is also likely that the selection of countries for the provision of development assistance programs will take account of their overall levels of poverty as well as their progress against Millennium Development Goals. However care needs to be taken to appreciate the gaps between sectors *within* Arab countries, in particular the extent of and trends within rural-urban income gaps and poverty levels in rural areas, in arriving at any overall country by country comparison of needs.

Adopting such an approach strengthens the case for considering countries such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan as candidates for bilateral assistance programs, despite their relatively high levels of per capita GDP. Before the civil war, Syria probably had a stronger case for assistance, in terms of absolute poverty indicators among its rural poor, than Jordan. Agriculture accounted for almost 20 percent of Syria's GDP and employment, and irrespective of the outcomes of the civil war, the economic outlook for rural Syrians is poor. Severe drought during 2006-2009 significantly reduced harvests and animal stocks, forcing at least 1.25m people to move to the cities. Climate change, environmental challenges and water shortages – which have been exacerbated by mismanagement – are expected to have a long-term impact.

Particularly while the regional political outlook is in a state of flux, there is a strong case for focusing on the provision of assistance through established multilateral and other international organizations which have both the standing and the technical capacity to operate effectively and credibly among regional governments under a range of political circumstances.

The economic, cultural and strategic focus of the North African Arab countries is overwhelmingly toward Europe. However agriculture and food security-related projects may also present opportunities to work closely with major Arab development agencies, such as the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, (KFAED) and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, (AFESD) also based in Kuwait. Both funds have worked effectively with western donors in the past, applying a high level of analytical rigour to the provision of loans for development purposes, and to evaluation of performance under those programs. They continue to be well regarded as established Arab institutional frameworks in which risks are managed in a reasonably cost-effective manner. They should also be part of any longer term development and recovery programs to address the need for durable solutions to the situation of internally-displaced Iraqis, Syrians and other refugees.

Scope may exist for aid programs in North Africa and Egypt to complement programs for Africa, strengthening ties with bodies such as the African Development Bank (temporarily headquartered in Tunisia). Development assistance can be linked to assistance to the food security initiatives of regional economic communities including COMESA and initiatives such as the AU's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP). There may be scope to leverage support through countries such as Egypt and Tunisia which each have aid programs in sub-Saharan African countries. Donor countries should be prepared to bring to the table their own views on how those institutions approach their engagement with regional countries.

Support through aid programs for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Affairs (DPA) and other partners linked to the UN

undertaking political economy research and peace building activity strengthens connections to networks that support aid objectives in fragile and conflict affected states. It has much to commend it as a way to help build more resilient and responsive states and societies, reduce vulnerability and marginalization and provide mediated pathways for conflict resolution.

Providing such assistance may also help, in low-key and uncontroversial ways, to strengthen donor dealings with Arab civil society, including in countries such as Bahrain and Libya that are ineligible for development assistance under DAC guidelines, but which nevertheless warrant attention in the wider Western interest of promoting values and maintaining balanced dealings among Arab states.

There will be an ongoing need to support humanitarian relief activities by UN agencies and the ICRC, FAO and WFP, especially for displaced and refugee populations. There will be significant requirements for emergency feeding in Yemen[24], Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, as well as Darfur, and significant risks of renewed conflict between Sudan and South Sudan in such places as Abyei, South Kordofan and the Nuba mountains. Assistance in these areas — with special attention to the particular vulnerability of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations — delivered through WFP, UNHCR and other multilateral agencies would be fully consistent with the overall direction of aid programs.

UNRWA and the Palestinians

So long as western donors seek to promote an economic and social environment in which peace building between the two sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may at least be possible at some stage,

24 Yemen has the third highest malnutrition rate in the world and is among the 10 countries with the highest rates of food insecurity, according to the World Bank. In 2010, over 50 per cent of the population of Yemen lived below the poverty line, and 17.53 per cent of people survived on less than US$1.25 per day. Around 7.5 million people – almost a third of the population – don't have enough to eat.

assistance for Palestinians should remain a key element of aid programs.

The economic and social situation in Gaza, especially in the aftermath of the conflict in the summer of 2014, is likely to remain acute so long as a stable and peaceful environment cannot be created between Israel and Hamas. Although the West Bank showed positive economic growth until mid-2010, the subsequent period has been marked by slowing job creation, growing unemployment and falling real wages. The economic outlook, fiscal situation and the political prospects for the Palestinian Authority (PA) remain heavily reliant on securing continued aid flows.

UNRWA continues to provide highly effective and accountable assistance to Palestinian refugees, despite growing tensions with Hamas. Its role will remain important in the provision of education, health and relief services, particularly in support of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon where refugees face ongoing institutional discrimination.

Support for UNRWA helps to sustain a political basis for a Middle East peace process to go forward when wider conditions allow. Its provision of services to Palestinian refugees strengthens the social infrastructure for a Palestinian state. It eases the burden on Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority of rapidly rising refugee populations. And major donor members of the Advisory Commission of UNRWA are well-placed to continue to shape UNRWA's strategic focus and operational priorities.

Agriculture

In addition to the importance of addressing the urban-rural gaps noted above, and in considering both bilateral and multilateral program possibilities, it is important to note that for almost all Arab countries, according priority to the agriculture sector in bilateral programs is likely to prove to be a comfortable fit with the priorities of almost all Arab governments, among whom food security is a

long-standing and increasingly serious issue. Although aid funding for agricultural initiatives has been decreasing since 1990, and the UN and the Arab League are committed to eradicating hunger, rising food prices and the reliance on imported food products — particularly for areas such as Yemen, where high food costs have put many citizens below the poverty line — are of serious concern.

Assistance in agriculture usually complements the environmental goals of aid programs. It can serve as a key focus of scholarship programs for the region which to strengthen national research capabilities. It provides uncontroversial but significant and measurable opportunities to improve productivity, as well as to generate employment and raise incomes. It provides an avenue to foster complementary programs, such as support for disadvantaged women within rural communities, and efforts to improve the situation of women and children, especially in fragile and conflict states and in post-conflict situations.

Agriculture also has potential to boost economic growth through trade. Most regional countries are party to free trade agreements with the EU, which has proposed a program of agricultural modernisation aligned to EU quality and food safety standards in partnership with FAO and the World Bank. The EU has upgraded preferential market access for agricultural products with Egypt and Jordan and several other agreements are being negotiated or at the approval stage, including for example with Morocco.

On the ground, interaction with western scientists and advisers often has reputational benefits where those involved are both technically competent and respectful of the aspirations and values of others. In Iraq, Jordan and Libya for example there are positive memories of previous Australian assistance, especially in regard to dryland farming, reforestation and prevention of erosion programs. There is scope to do more in such areas as rangeland management and animal production, and water and salinity management, and to focus on strengthening research capability in conservation agriculture, with application to Jordan, Syria, Iraq, the North African countries

and Sudan (where rainfed agriculture is an important concern for Darfur and Eastern Sudan and the Sahel provinces).

The best-known and most effective agricultural research institution in the Arab world is the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), which has been remarkably successful in the development of conservation agriculture techniques. Relocated temporarily to Beirut from Aleppo in Syria in 2012, it is a world-class facility, with an impressive training program. Its focus on making agriculture viable under changing conditions and in marginal areas provides support to the rural poor to a greater degree than those who farm or raise livestock in more benign agricultural conditions. A regional office located in Tunis undertakes research and training for Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. Yemen, Sudan and Egypt are covered under ICARDA's Nile Valley and Red Sea regional program.

Tunisia has positive bilateral relations with the other Arab countries of the Maghreb and represents a benign environment for the development of research programs. The African Development Bank (ADB) presently headquartered in Tunis and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) may be linked to the research programs addressing food security programs elsewhere in Africa. There is also a case for supporting research into irrigated agriculture and water management science of potential benefit to the countries of the Nile Basin, possibly under the auspices of ICARDA's Nile Valley and Red Sea regional program.

Conclusion

The prospects for western countries being able to make a significant impact upon the direction of regional events since the tumultuous events of 2011 are limited. The idea of democratic legitimacy in the region has been fatally wounded, at least for this generation of voters, and for Islamist activists. The region faces an extended period in which the authority of states has been weakened.[25] And

25 Marc Lynch, 'This is what an Arab election season looks like in 2014', *Washington Post*, 21 April 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.

the weakening of Arab states, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, has created the battlefields of a new Middle East cold war linking domestic conflicts, transnational affinities and regional state ambitions.[26]

Politically and socially, Egypt, and most of the Arab world, have become more regressive than progressive in spirit compared to the heady days of January 2011.[27] Whether we are witnessing in Egypt a reversion to the power of the deep state; or whether it might be more accurate to argue that it never really lost its grip on the essentials of power in the first place, the current phase has seen the Egyptian military and security apparatus clearly in the ascendant.

However the turmoil of the past few years should not obscure two key matters so far as the western countries are concerned. First, the factors which have given rise to this period of unprecedented turmoil are in some ways more important than the political outcomes that have emerged since that period. We are witnessing the early stages of a process that will be shaped more by enduring forces for progress—including education, health, nutrition, connectivity and wage based female employment— than by the resistance of neo-traditionalist opponents of change.
Second, if western countries wish their values to be respected among those who are most active in the promotion of reform, they will need to be active in seeking ways to find ways of supporting those

---

com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/21/arab-election-season/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=Mideast%20brief%204-22-14

26 F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Brookings Doha Center, 22 July 2014, http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/07/22-beyond-sectarianism-cold-war-gause?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=2014_The%20Middle%20East%20Daily_7.22.14 (accessed 23 July 2014).

27 'The tragedy of the Arabs', *The Economist*, July 5-11 2014, http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21606284-civilisation-used-lead-world-ruinsand-only-locals-can-rebuild-it

progressive elements who share those values *and* who are willing to work for them. They may have no real choice except to cooperate with and deliver their ideas, experience and material assistance through the states and state-sponsored institutions of the countries concerned, accepting that such dealings may not always be easy to reconcile with other foreign policy priorities and values.

At the end of the day, the Arab state remains the only means by which visions of progressive reform may be transformed into policy, and applied to the benefit of citizens in general. State to state dealings will continue to provide the best basis for each side to arrive at a reasonably durable balance under any given circumstances between its various interests and objectives, and those of its counterpart. But within those parameters western countries should continue trying to identify specific areas and institutions through which a positive and constructive western contribution to strengthening the resilience of Arab states and societies may prove to be of enduring benefit to all parties.

At a practical level, one approach, as mentioned above, may be to focus on those areas in which all sides agree urgent action is required, and to accord high priority to addressing the need to improve food security and the strengthening of agricultural sectors in Arab countries, making effective use of established multilateral and Arab regional institutions. Humanitarian relief will also be of great importance to the vulnerable populations displaced by regional conflicts.

The key challenge, however, will be to remain relevant—through linkages at institutional levels, people-to-people contact and the sharing of experience and ideas— to the forces shaping the regional outlook as the momentum for reform re-gathers strength in coming years.

Prof. Robert Bowker lecturing at MEDAC. (On the right sitting) Dr. Derek Lutterbeck, MEDAC Deputy Director and Lecturer in International History.

Prof. Stephen Calleya, MEDAC Director, presenting his book "Security Challenges in the Euro-Med Area in the 21st Century: Mare Nostrum" to Prof. Robert Bowker (left).

About MEDAC

The Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC) is an institution of higher learning offering advanced degrees in diplomacy and conflict resolution with a focus on Mediterranean issues.

MEDAC was established in 1990 pursuant to an agreement between the governments of Malta and Switzerland. The Academy is currently co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malta in the framework of the Swiss contribution to the new European Union member states. The Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (HEID) was among MEDAC's first foreign partners. More recently, MEDAC has concluded an agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany, represented by the Foreign Office, in turn represented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and established a German Chair in Peace Studies and Conflict Prevention.

In 2014, MEDAC celebrates its 25th anniversary. Since its inception, MEDAC has acquired a solid reputation both as an academic institution and as a practical training platform. We are fortunate to count over 670 alumni from 59 different countries who have completed successfully the post-graduate courses offered by the Academy. The EU's enlargement towards the Mediterranean, that included Malta in 2004, and the recent transformation of the political landscape throughout the Arab World have resulted in an ever increasing demand for MEDAC's programme of studies.

Academy Courses

- Master of Arts in Diplomatic Studies (M. A.)
- Master of Diplomacy (M. Dip.)
- **NEW** Joint M.A. with George Mason University (Virginia, USA) on Conflict Resolution and Mediterranean Security
- Diploma in Diplomacy (DDS)

The programme of Master of Diplomacy (M. Dip.) course is designed for junior diplomats with some field experience. They are instructed in the same core disciplines as the M.A. students (Diplomatic History, International Relations, International Economics, International Law as well as selected lectures in diplomacy) but with a special emphasis on diplomatic practice, languages, public speaking and on-line skills.

The course covers two semesters, from October to June, and includes field trips to Switzerland and to Germany. (See details of all courses on the website: **www.um.edu.mt/medac**)