



# Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

## Adversity and Opportunity

Facing the Security and Policy  
Challenges in the Middle East

**Shadi Hamid**  
**Daniel Byman**

**Clingendael report**

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# Executive Summary

The Middle East presents numerous strategic challenges to the West and Europe in particular. The promise of the 2011 Arab uprisings is gone, and civil conflict wracks Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. A military coup and subsequent crackdown in Egypt have shattered hopes of democracy there, while even bright spots like Tunisia see an increase in terrorism. New extremist groups like ISIS present a challenging set of security threats to the region and, importantly, Europe.

In this report, Shadi Hamid and Daniel Byman examine key dynamics and drivers of Middle East conflict in a post-Arab Spring era. The report is divided into six sections, each of which identifies a regional challenge, critically examines past and ongoing efforts to address the problems, and outlines policy implications and recommendations for the European Union, the United States, and other involved actors.

In Part 1, “**Civil Wars in the Middle East**,” Byman lays out the security and humanitarian dynamics of the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. In all these countries, the confluence of ethnic, religious, tribal, and ideological fissures with a vast governance deficit has resulted in bloody civil conflicts that are fast spilling into neighboring countries.

Conflict spillover – including the economic and social burdens created by refugee crises and the spread of extremism – are destabilizing neighboring countries, raising the risk of military intervention and reactive violence. To counter the continuing violence in Syria and Iraq, the EU and its international partners should consider how to better and more seriously support mainstream actors – who are both anti-Asad and against the ISIS – in the form of training missions, equipment, and other material support. The provision of state-building and security assistance to nations hosting large refugee communities – such as Lebanon, Jordan, and even Turkey – is vital to contain conflict and temper economic and social tensions in refugee communities.

In Part 2, “**Stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process**,” Byman examines the political and security implications of the failure of peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine. Although both Palestinians and Israelis have largely expressed a preference for two-state solution over continued conflict, both populations are skeptical that peace negotiations can deliver a satisfactory deal that addresses their own fundamental demands. In Israel, rising popular support for right-wing narratives and the increasing momentum of the settler movement erode hopes for a two-state solution. Meanwhile, Palestinian frustration with settlements and persistent anti-Arab violence grows, lending strength to rejectionist narratives – such as those propagated by Hamas and other armed groups – particularly in the beleaguered Gaza Strip.

Divisions within the Palestinian leadership and a weakened Palestinian Authority (PA) mean that leaders are unable to address the governance needs of the Palestinian population or negotiate effectively. Meanwhile, crises in Syria and elsewhere have drawn the attention of policymakers away from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Amidst this stagnation, it is unlikely that further peace negotiations – whether led by Europe or the United States – will bring about a positive result. Instead of resuming peace talks, Europe and the United States should work

together to strengthen Mahmoud Abbas and the PA. Western states should also encourage the PA to assume responsibility for Gaza by expanding its administrative and, eventually, security presence there.

Part 3, “**Foreign Fighters from Europe and the Arab World**,” Byman identifies the various threats posed by individuals returning to their home countries after fighting with extremist groups in Syria and Iraq. Over 20,000 fighters have traveled to Iraq and Syria to support a range of Sunni militant groups, including ISIS. Although European concerns have run high following the recent attacks in Paris, the threat of violence carried out by foreign fighters to Europe, while present, is largely overstated. Some volunteers will not return home and most that do will not carry out attacks. However, returning foreign fighters to Arab countries, which have supplied the bulk of foreign fighters in Syria, do present an acute risk to their nations, as fighters can recruit from vulnerable populations, make existing groups more radical, and carry out attacks.

Europe should take care to not overstate the threat of foreign fighters and take steps to reassure citizens that the risk is real but limited. However, Europe should also strengthen and provide ongoing resources to security and intelligence services to keep the threat low. Importantly, European governments should avoid reactive policies such as systematic prosecution and imprisonment of returnees. Some returnees must be imprisoned immediately and others monitored, but governments should also channel resources towards community-led programs emphasizing the rehabilitation and reintegration of returned fighters.

Part 4, “**Religion Matters: How Islam Relates to Politics**,” Shadi Hamid explores the role of Islam in Middle Eastern conflicts and outlines how religion, identity, and ideology influence and shape regional trends in sometimes unexpected ways. In contrast to Europe – which eventually secularized after the Reformation – the ideas of Islam still hold a broad resonance among Muslim-majority populations. While the overwhelming majority of Muslims disagree with their interpretation of Islam, ISIS and other extremist groups derive part of their support and strength from deeply embedded Islamic notions, such as the idea of the caliphate, or the transnational community of Muslims.

Foundational divides on religious and ideological lines have deepened across the Middle East, which will continue to hinder prospects of democratization or stability, or both. While such divides, which are based on real fundamental differences, cannot be wished away, Europe and the international community can do more to help Middle Eastern populations mitigate and manage the divides through the toolbox of “consociational democracy,” including by opting for parliamentary over presidential systems, promoting proportional electoral systems and power-sharing, and decentralizing and distributing state power.

In Part 5, “**‘Regionalization’ of Local Conflict**,” Hamid illustrates the interconnected nature of Middle East crises and lays out common drivers of conflict. Since the Arab Spring, conflicts that were previously localized or contained have crossed national borders and have developed into regional proxy wars. Gulf support to the Egyptian military was instrumental in the 2013 overthrow of the democratically elected Morsi and the consolidation of the Sisi regime; Gulf countries view the Brotherhood and like-minded groups as an existential threat not just in Egypt but in several other crisis areas. Egypt’s troubles, for example, have spilled over into Libya in the form of a more acute Islamist-secular divide and the rise of strongmen such as General Khalifa Haftar.

To counter this phenomenon, Europe and its partners should consider recalibrating their relationships with traditional regional partners who contribute to this regionalization of conflict. Europe and the United States can shift from a strategic to a transactional relationship with Middle Eastern allies, where there is rapprochement on issues of convergence, but distancing on other issues that compromise Western security interests. Importantly, Europe should encourage and, when appropriate, exert pressure on Arab allies to avoid politicizing counterterrorism efforts – for example by using the ISIS threat to justify measures against domestic opponents – and should base counterterrorism efforts on identifying actual terrorists.

In Part 6, “**Renewed Authoritarianism**,” Hamid explains how the Arab Spring has re-empowered “strongmen” leaders, who promise stability at the expense of democracy. A massive expectations gap in countries with initially successful autocratic ousters – such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya – contributed to perceptions of failing democracy, which served to increase the appeal of would-be autocrats. Meanwhile, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey has adopted increasingly illiberal and undemocratic practices. The resort to strongmen, while offering an illusion of stability, perpetuates a culture of privileging individuals over institutions and postpones addressing very real governance deficits that lie at the base of most Middle East conflicts.

To encourage political openings, Europe and its international partners should provide economic and political incentives for governments to meet explicit, measurable benchmarks on democratic reform. One such mechanism is a proposed Multilateral Endowment for Reform. The international community should also think how to bind young, fragile democracies like Tunisia to “thick” regional order, by replicating, even if at a much more limited level, the mechanisms of the EU accession process, which produced promising results in Turkey.

# Introduction

Lying at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and North Africa, the Middle East presents strategic challenges to the European Union and the West in the political, social, religious, and energy realms. The advent of the Arab uprisings in 2011 has four years later resulted in civil conflict in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, in addition to a military coup and subsequent crackdown in Egypt. Ongoing strife has empowered extremist groups such as ISIS, presenting a new and challenging set of security threats to the region and, importantly, Europe.

This report attempts to take a step back and take stock of the key dynamics and drivers of Middle East conflict in a post-Arab Spring era. It is divided into six sections, each of which approaches one of the broader strategic issue areas or trends facing policymakers and the people of the region. Each section identifies the associated challenges of the trend, critically examines past and ongoing efforts to address these challenges, and outlines policy implications and recommendations for the European Union (EU), the United States, and other involved actors.

The first half of the report, authored by Daniel Byman, focuses on the most immediate issue areas and security challenges for Europe. The second half, authored by Shadi Hamid, focuses on longer-term trends dealing with the role of Islam and Islamism in Middle Eastern politics, the “regionalization” of local conflict, as well as the question of renewed authoritarianism and what Europe and the United States can and should do in response. Part 1 “Civil Wars in the Middle East,” lays out the security and humanitarian, dynamics of the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. Part 2, “Stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process,” examines the political and security implications of the failure of peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine. Part 3, “Foreign Fighters from Europe and the Arab World,” identifies the various threats posed by individuals returning to their home countries after fighting with extremist groups in Syria and Iraq.

Part 4, “Religion Matters,” explores the role of Islam in Middle Eastern conflicts and outlines how religion, identity, and ideology influence and shape regional trends in sometimes unexpected ways. Part 5, “‘Regionalization’ of Local Conflict,” illustrates the interconnected nature of Middle East conflicts and lays out the drivers of conflict in the region. Part 6, “Renewed Authoritarianism,” explains how the international community can respond to the resurgence of authoritarian practices in the Middle East after the Arab Spring.

Through a balanced analysis of each trend – drawing on the authors’ on the ground research and interviews – this report aims to identify areas meriting further attention from Dutch policymakers and arm them with the knowledge to respond to challenges effectively.



# 1. Civil Wars in the Middle East

Daniel Byman

The Arab Spring unleashed civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen and added fuel to the flames of the ongoing civil war in Iraq. Egypt's military government also is fighting a nascent civil war against radical Islamist groups. The Sisi regime deliberately conflates Islamist radical groups with the Muslim Brotherhood, which it overthrew in a coup in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Twenty years ago, the Middle East was a region where autocratic regimes seemed painfully well-entrenched; today the region is no closer to democracy but it is in chaos.

## A Region in Chaos

The death toll from the Middle East's civil wars is staggering. Over 3,000 Egyptians have died since the coup,<sup>2</sup> most of them civilians. Over 10,000 Libyans died in the civil war that led to Moammar Qaddafi's fall,<sup>3</sup> and hopes of peace since then have been dashed: several thousand more Libyans have died in fighting. Numbers in Yemen are particularly vague, but several thousand Yemenis died in the fighting that led to Ali Abdullah Saleh's downfall, and thousands more have perished in the civil strife involving Houthis, Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, remnants of the Yemeni government, and other actors. Those numbers are likely to surge in 2015, as the civil war has led to intervention from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other neighbors. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died in the fighting after the U.S.-led ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003. By 2011, the conflict seemed to be ending, but it surged again, with over 25,000 people dying in the years that followed. Worst of all, over 200,000 people have died in the Syrian civil war alone.<sup>4</sup> All of these conflicts seem to be getting worse.

The death toll, of course, tells only part of the story. The Syrian civil war has led to a massive refugee flows and internal displacement, with roughly half of the population leaving their homes. Refugees have poured into Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey: the first two countries are poor and have limited capacity to absorb and manage the refugees. The civil wars in Yemen and Libya are producing millions of refugees and displaced, straining state capacity everywhere.

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1 Egypt is not normally listed on the Middle East region's list of civil wars. However, a standard political science definition of civil wars involves a minimum of 1,000 "battle deaths" in total and, by some measures, Egypt could be included in that figure.

2 Neil Ketchley and Michael Biggs, "What is the Egyptian anti-coup movement protesting for?" *Washington Post*, 4 April 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/04/what-is-the-egyptian-anti-coup-movement-protesting-for/>.

3 This figure is down from the over 25,000 figure that was common after Qaddafi's fall. See "Libyan Revolution Casualties Lower than Expected," *The Guardian*, 8 January 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/08/libyan-revolution-casualties-lower-expected-government>.

4 "Syria death toll now exceeds 210,000: rights group," Reuters, 7 February 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/07/us-mideast-crisis-toll-idUSKBN0LB0DY20150207>.

Other countries also seem at risk from the contagion of civil war. Lebanon in particular is vulnerable to the winds of sectarianism and jihadist extremism sweeping its Syrian neighbor, but political violence and low-level insurgency is also a problem in Algeria, made worse by the mounting civil war in Libya.

## Drivers of Conflict

Ironically, many of the same drivers that produced the Arab spring and the heady burst of hope that the region might become more democratic have also produced the civil wars that have proven so horrendous. The pre-Arab spring regimes that now suffer civil wars lacked legitimacy: none were democratically elected or otherwise had a significant popular imprimatur on their rule. Nor did the regimes enjoy the more limited legitimacy that many Arab monarchs gained from hereditary rule (and, in the case of oil-rich Gulf states, the provision of a generous set of social welfare benefits).<sup>5</sup> Rather, regimes in Syria, Libya, and other Arab republics claimed revolutionary legitimacy even as they tried to turn their tyrannies into hereditary rule, appointing their children or other relatives to positions of power. They also did not deliver economically: stagnation, and at times decline, characterized their rule. Their populations often were well-educated, but they had little hope of achieving their ambitions of a better life.

The Arab spring brought an end to the authoritarian stasis but did not lead to the emergence of new leaders with broad legitimacy. In part because the regimes did not fall to well-established opposition movements, there was no clear successor to step in and rule. In Libya and Yemen, a pre-existing diversity in ideology, tribe, region, and other divisions prevented new leaders from uniting. In Iraq, the Maliki regime enjoyed some legitimacy from elections but tried to consolidate its power among Iraqi Shi'a, increasing discrimination and repression against Sunni Iraqis. Syria, of course, never saw a successful ouster.

Egypt initially seemed to be an exception that proved the rule. After the fall of Mubarak, the better-organized Islamists in the Muslim Brotherhood won elections and otherwise seemed poised to consolidate power. However, the Brotherhood did a poor job of governing and did not accommodate other political groups within Egypt, alienating many Egyptians. The Sisi regime came to power in a coup, albeit one that had significant popular backing. Sisi then ran for President, but in a system where the most important opposition was not part of the process. Thus though he is supported by many Egyptians, recent polling suggests that the population is fairly evenly divided, with the Brotherhood retaining significant support and the military losing its longstanding status as one of Egypt's "consensus" institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Many countries also suffer from deep fissures — ethnic, religious, tribal, and ideological. Iraq's Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish communities have separate identities that are growing stronger at the expense of an Iraqi national identity: elections have at times led to further polarization rather than bringing Iraqis together. Making this more complex, these communities have internal fissures that make unified action more difficult and hinder compromise. In Libya and Yemen, tribe and region divide the country; Yemen has a growing sectarian divide between

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5 F. Gregory Gause, III, "Kings for All Seasons: How the Middle East's Monarchies Survived the Arab Spring," *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* No. 8, September 2013, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2013/09/24-resilience-arab-monarchies-gause/Resilience-Arab-Monarchies\\_English.pdf?la=en](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2013/09/24-resilience-arab-monarchies-gause/Resilience-Arab-Monarchies_English.pdf?la=en).

6 Spring 2014 Global Attitudes Survey: Egypt, *Pew Research Center*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/05/22/one-year-after-morsis-ouster-divides-persist-on-el-sisi-muslim-brotherhood/>.

the Shi'a (from the Zeidi sect) Houthi rebels and the Sunni jihadists of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Syria has long been dominated by a ruling class of Alawites – a minority sect associated with Shiism – who have worked with other religious minorities such as Christians to offset the Sunni Arab majority. The list goes on.

Such fissures are by no means unique to the Middle East. However, they are more likely to come to the surface because neither the regime nor opposition forces in any of these countries are strong enough to govern. In the past, dictators held Iraq, Libya, and Syria together through fear: these dictators deliberately sowed suspicion, undermined independent organization, and otherwise divided and ruled. When they fell and their coercive apparatuses fragmented, the divisions remained.

The state military in many countries is controlled exclusively by one community. Iraq's military is dominated by the Abadi-government and its Shi'a constituency. The Syrian state military is a tool of the Asad regime. In Yemen and Libya, the military is not independent of the parties jockeying for power. In all these countries the army is seen by rival communities as another militia and distrusted and feared accordingly. Outside efforts to "state-build" and train military forces so far have often simply assisted one militia over another, rather than built a truly national, unified force.

Weapons are now widespread in countries rocked by civil war. The fall of regimes in Iraq and Libya, for example, led to the looting of arsenals and the spread of well-armed militias. They remained armed and organized even during periods of relative peace, using their military strength to try to exact more patronage and political power.

Conflict in one state contributes to conflict next door. The waves of passion and fear do not end at borders. The Iraqi and Syrian conflicts are entwined. After 2011, Iraqi jihadists used Syria as a rear base in which to organize, train, recruit, and arm, rebuilding their organizations from the severe setbacks they had suffered since 2006. They helped radicalize the Syrian opposition, eventually spawning two bloody, but capable, fighting groups: Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. ISIS in particular proved able to return the fighting to Iraq, surging from its base in Syria to reignite the Iraqi civil war. In both countries, groups see the conflict as part of a whole: Iran and its Shi'a allies (Asad, Hizballah, etc.) versus the Sunni community.

This spread of conflict and unrest alarms neighbors. They may try to back one faction in the civil war, reverse a regime change, fight a terrorist group that threatens them, or otherwise intervention. This intervention often makes the problems worse, leading to more bloodshed and further weakening governments and state capacity in general.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

The humanitarian consequences of the wars in the Middle East are considerable and will place pressure on Western states to act. The ongoing violence and suffering are producing a high volume of refugees, many of whom will seek safety in the West. In addition, the religious nature of the violence, as well as the staggering cruelty of groups like ISIS, are especially pressing as religious minorities have a well-founded fear of persecution. The demands in the region will be even higher. Most refugees will flow to neighboring states, and the displaced will need assistance as well. Financial assistance to neighboring states and international organizations to care for refugees is vital: in late 2014, the United Nations requested over

\$8.4 billion to support the humanitarian needs of the nearly 18 million displaced persons in Syria and in the MENA region.<sup>7</sup>

The broader agenda to promote regional democracy is being challenged. The Arab spring transformed several stable dictatorships into bloody civil wars: the initial hopes of freedom are now dashed. The autocratic argument that they are the bulwark against instability and terrorism has become stronger in a context of regional chaos, and Western governments may have little appetite for promoting democratization. Democracy promotion must reflect this new political reality and, in particular, shore up the few successes like Tunisia.

Spillover is a particular risk. The ethnic and religious ties that unite much of the Middle East make it easier for ideas and movements – both positive and negative ones – to cross national borders. Civil wars often offer opportunities for terrorist groups to grow stronger or for new groups to arise: all the civil wars in the Middle East have already seen this. Many of these groups do not want to confine the wars to existing borders.

Refugees also pose a potential security risk. The Palestinian refugees who fled the 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel used the refugee camps as a place to organize for the fight against Israel, and at times to oppose the governments that hosted them. In addition, their host governments exploited the refugees to fight Israel and for the intra-Arab fight. The Syrian conflict and other regional civil wars may produce similar problems. Hundreds of thousands of young men are unemployed near a conflict zone and fighting groups will seek to mobilize them. In countries like Lebanon with weak governments, young males may also be exploited by groups seeking to expand the conflict. Thus the refugee challenge is both a humanitarian one and one that demands a security response.

Jihadist groups in particular have grown strong and are likely to seek out Westerners who come into the war zones. Their primary goal is to kidnap Westerners for ransom: as many European states pay high ransoms for their citizens, they encourage more kidnappings.<sup>8</sup> This is a disastrous and short-sighted policy: while it is right for governments to care about their citizens, paying ransom today ensures more citizens will be at risk tomorrow. When ransoms are not available, the publicized execution of Westerners grabs media attention and otherwise helps groups recruit and fundraise.

The violence may lead to intermittent oil supply disruptions. For all the militias, control of oil is an important resource for ensuring their power and denying it to rivals. Libya and Iraq are major oil producers, and civil wars in these countries have at times taken millions of barrels a day offline.<sup>9</sup> The current glut in oil supply, and Iraq's ability to shield much of its oil output from the violence, limit the price impact of this today. However, should the oil supply become tighter, the economic risk will grow.

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7 "UN launches appeal for life-saving aid to millions of Syrians, support to host communities," *UN News Centre*, 18 December 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49639#.VPTKgcy7RI8>.

8 Rukmini Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror," *New York Times*, July 29, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html?_r=0).

9 See for example Steve Hargreaves, "Libyan Oil Could Take Years to Come Back," *CNN.com*, August 23, 2011, <http://money.cnn.com/2011/08/23/markets/libya-oil-production/>.

Military intervention from neighbors or other states is also likely. The risk of terrorism, the instability refugees can create, and the security fears of outside actors are all exacerbated by the civil war. Libya has already seen Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) conduct bombing missions against one side in the civil war. In particular, neighboring states fear that the victory of one group in a civil war, such as a Muslim Brotherhood-linked faction or Shi'a groups, might ignite domestic opposition in their own country. In 2015 Saudi Arabia and other states began intervening in Yemen in order to restore the government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and reverse the gains of Houthi rebels – an intervention with no immediate end in sight.

An important U.S. and European role is to try to stop such independent interventions in these wars. When countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates back one actor over another, it exacerbates social divisions and makes reconciliation more difficult. In addition, these powers' militaries tend to be relatively weak, so they are not able to decisively tip the balance. At times they may even provoke a counter-reaction and escalatory spiral from each other (e.g. Qatar and the UAE) or from more hostile states like Iran.

Particularly dangerous is the tendency in both Tehran and Riyadh to see the conflicts as part of a broader proxy war. In Yemen, both regimes are arming opposing sides, making the violence worse and hindering efforts at reconciliation. In Syria, Iran has provided massive military and economic assistance to the Asad regime, and also sent loyal militias from Iraq and the Lebanese Hizballah to help in the fighting. Meanwhile, a number of Gulf states and Turkey have worked with an array of Syrian opposition forces. Similarly, in Iraq the Iranian regime is working closely with Abadi and many of the Shi'a militias (which are also death squads), creating fears that the government is in reality an Iranian pawn. These fears are overstated, and Iran's influence is likely to be limited; however, the Gulf states are reacting as if Iran poses a direct threat. This in turn encourages Iran to establish more ties to local fighters, fueling the fire.

State-building and security assistance are vital to contain the conflict and manage refugees. Lebanon and Jordan are particularly vulnerable given the huge numbers of Syrian refugees relative to the population and the economic weakness of these governments. Even strong states like Turkey may need some assistance.

Pressure will also grow for military intervention on humanitarian and strategic grounds. The intervention may take the form of arming and training actors in the civil wars, either on the government side or one of the opposition groups. European states may also face pressure to step up direct military involvement, often in conjunction with the United States. Possible military roles include providing trainers for anti-ISIS forces, assisting in establishing a no-fly zone over Syria, establishing safe areas for refugees, and other limited missions.

Establishing no-fly zones and safe areas are options that are politically appealing but strategically mistaken. Such operations enable outside powers to claim that they are acting decisively and in the short-term may protect Syrians from regime or ISIS depredations. However, the killing in Syria would continue in large numbers without air power, and patrolling a no-fly zone would involve a significant and sustained air effort. It would also create an expectation that the West's intervention is meant to defend Syrians, and it would be politically difficult to walk away from that whatever caveats are initially given to guard against further involvement. Moreover, there is always a chance that a lucky shot or mechanical problem would lead to a plane being downed and a pilot captured – as Jordan found out to its horror. Most important,

the continued killing in spite of these operations would lead to additional pressure to escalate and increase military involvement: and if that is done, there is no need for the halfway measures in the first place.

Training missions are necessary to strengthen the moderate Syrian opposition. Much of its lack of credibility is due to its poor battlefield performance: reversing this is a necessary step toward increasing its political clout. In addition, any long-term solution depends on having strong and capable moderate opposition military forces: if Assad and ISIS are defeated, something must take their places. However, the international community should draw lessons from the failure to develop a stronger army and security institutions in Libya after the 2011 internationally assisted ouster of Qaddafi. When the government is controlled by one social faction, it is in effect more like a militia than a national army, whatever its trappings. Outside powers should take care to ensure that any training and support program involves all moderate social actors and otherwise is a force for unity.

The policy questions are particularly difficult regarding Syria. In Iraq, the United States has put together an uneasy set of local allies – Sunni tribes, the Abadi government, and Kurdish groups – that work along with Shi'a militias, many of which are tied to Iran. Relying on this mix of strange bedfellows has many problems, but together they are containing and pushing back ISIS. In Syria, there are no such allies: the moderate Syrian opposition is weak and getting weaker, and working with the Assad regime is unpalatable. Negotiations are at a dead end. A new policy is needed.

## 2. Stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

Daniel Byman

The peace process between Israelis and Palestinians is dead, and there is little hope it will be revived in the near-term. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to push the parties to a deal came to naught by the summer of 2014, and even then the effort seemed to be running on fumes. Efforts by the Quartet on the Middle East<sup>10</sup> or other parties to move things forward have also stagnated. Increasingly the sentiment in the international community seems to be that the peace process is a lost cause — at least until conditions and politics change on both the Israeli and the Palestinian side.

### Suspicion on Both Sides

Polls have long suggested both Israelis and Palestinians favor peace despite terrorism, war, and numerous other problems.<sup>11</sup> Yet both populations remain skeptical of the capacity of negotiations to bring a deal about.

Israelis have grown skeptical of peace talks. Optimism never recovered from the violence of the second intifada, which for many Israelis proved that Palestinians remained hostile to the Jewish state and that Palestinian leaders would use any negotiations as a way to prepare for the next round of armed conflict. The Israeli settler movement remains strong, and is gaining momentum as the number of settlements steadily increases. Greater numbers of supporters in the settler movement increase the group's political clout within Israel; this is further magnified by the Israeli political system, which gives small factions and political parties disproportionate influence. Politically, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is skeptical of peace negotiations, as are his likely coalition partners. Ideas that were once extreme for mainstream Israeli parties, such as annexing large parts of the West Bank, are now openly discussed. Indeed, the Israeli left is primarily running on economic issues rather than stressing the need for peace talks with the Palestinians, reflecting the lack of political support that a peace platform has among the Israeli body politic.

The status quo also works for Israel in many ways. Economic growth in Israel since the end of the second intifada has been strong — roughly 4 percent a year according to the World Bank.<sup>12</sup> The Israeli death count from terrorism is now low and does not disrupt daily life as it

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10 The Diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East is composed of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Russia.

11 See, for example, Shibley Telhami's 2010 polling of Palestinian, Israeli, and American public attitudes towards the peace process. Shibley Telhami, "Attitudes Toward the Middle East Peace Process: Surveys of Arab and Jewish Opinion in Israel and Public Opinion in the United States," *Brookings Institution*, December 2010, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2010/12/09-israel-public-opinion-telhami>.

12 Israel Databank, *World Bank IBRD-IDA*, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/israel>.



did during the second intifada. Even the various wars in Gaza and associated rocket attacks have killed relatively few Israelis; there are far more casualties on the Palestinian side.<sup>13</sup>

Like Israelis, Palestinians remain skeptical of talks – and will be even more so now that Netanyahu has returned to power after a promise to ensure that there would be no Palestinian state. Palestinians perceive settlements as visible indicators that Israel has no plans to leave the West Bank. In urban areas such as Jerusalem, Palestinians believe Israeli policy is deliberately designed to change the demographics of the city to prevent even part of it from returning to Palestinian control. Many settlers are also strongly anti-Arab, using low-level but persistent violence to intimidate and demean their Arab neighbors and otherwise make life difficult for them, further souring relations. In addition to continued settlement-building, Palestinians believe Israel has not fulfilled the terms of previous agreements and that Israeli demands are growing rather than becoming more conciliatory.<sup>14</sup>

The collapse of peace talks further weakens Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and like-minded leaders are politically vulnerable, and their weakness in turn makes talks even less likely to succeed. Negotiations are also hindered because radical voices can claim that years of negotiations have resulted only in more settlements, and that violence has prompted Israeli withdrawals from Gaza and Lebanon.

The Palestinian leadership is also divided, further reducing the prospects for successful negotiations. The split between Abbas and his allies in Fatah and the Islamist movement Hamas is profound: the recent reconciliation efforts are a step toward unity, but the two movements remain hostile to each other and seek to undermine each other when possible. So far reconciliation has occurred more in name than in reality: the Abbas government has made few moves to establish itself in Gaza. The moderate leadership on the West Bank is old and often out of touch with Palestinians in Gaza. Abbas, a 79 year-old smoker, may not remain in power long for health reasons, and it is not clear who will succeed him.

The United States, which has promoted peace talks for decades, is increasingly skeptical as well. Kerry's efforts did not have strong White House backing: U.S. officials appear increasingly resigned to the continuing impasse. Nor are there alternatives from the international community to a U.S.-led process.

## Hamas' Dilemma

In such an atmosphere, rejectionist voices are likely to grow stronger. Groups like Hamas have long scorned peace talks and criticized moderate leaders for selling out the Palestinian patrimony. On the Israeli side, Jewish violence against Palestinians has grown, as have expressions of hostility toward Israel's Arab citizens.<sup>15</sup>

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13 "Gaza crisis: Toll of operations in Gaza," *BBC*, 1 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28439404>.

14 For further reading on Palestinian views, see David Pollock, "New Palestinian Poll Shows Hardline Views, But Some Pragmatism Too," *The Washington Institute*, 25 June 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-palestinian-poll-shows-hardline-views-but-some-pragmatism-too>.

15 Larry Derfner, "Settler Violence in the West Bank: A Decades'-Long Reign of Terror on Unarmed Palestinians," *Centre for Research on Globalization*, 21 January 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/settler-violence-in-the-west-bank-a-decades-long-reign-of-terror-on-unarmed-palestinians/5366169>.



One silver lining in the quest for peace is that Hamas is currently weak. Hamas often gains a short-term bump in popularity during any war against Israel, as Palestinians rally to “resistance” when Palestinians are being killed. However, the economic isolation of Gaza has prevented development there, and the coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt changed Hamas’ greatest potential ally into a bitter foe. The devastation Israel inflicted on Gaza in various wars has made Gazans reluctant to engage in further confrontation with Israel, and Hamas is wary of another round of fighting. The Islamist group has signaled that it will not directly interfere with peace talks and would abide by existing agreements, though there is disagreement within the movement on this key question.

Indeed, Hamas has its own radicalization problem. When Hamas cuts deals with Israel or accepts a de facto truce, groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad (which often works closely with Iran) and Salafi-jihadists with an ideology more akin to al-Qaeda criticize Hamas for betraying the struggle. Hamas must also worry about rejectionists in its military wing, which might attack on their own or support other groups. At times these groups attack Israel directly and Hamas faces a difficult choice: crack down and be seen as Israel’s Quisling, or turn a blind eye and risk Israeli retaliation. Some Israelis recognize Hamas’ weakness, but there are divisions on what to do. However, as the 2014 fighting in Gaza indicated, there is no desire among Israelis to reoccupy Gaza.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

In such an atmosphere, political crises and even limited wars are likely. Seeking legitimacy, Palestinian leaders will appeal for membership in international organizations, with Israel – and usually the United States – opposing such measures. Abbas has already taken tentative steps in this direction, and future leaders are even more likely to do so. Such measures enable Palestinian leaders to remain peaceful yet maintain an atmosphere of confrontation with Israel that will placate a population eager to see something, anything, being done to advance Palestinian statehood. Israelis see them as part of a broader campaign to delegitimize the Jewish state (for example, by bringing war crimes charges to the International Criminal Court) and as a way of gaining statehood while bypassing negotiations. European states may be caught in the middle, with their citizens favoring the Palestinian position but Israeli and U.S. pressure to oppose these measures.

More worrisome is the high risk of renewed war between Israel and Hamas. The two have fought in 2009–2009, 2012, and 2014, and leaders on both sides believe another war is likely. Israeli leaders see Hamas as inherently hostile towards Israeli interests, and worry that any long pause in the fighting will enable Hamas to build up its armed forces. Indeed, Hamas has already developed a rocket arsenal that threatens Israel.<sup>16</sup> In general Israel’s policy aims to keep Hamas weak in both the West Bank and in Gaza. In the West Bank, it works with Palestinian security officials, which also seek to keep Hamas weak. They target Hamas’ social and political presence as well as any military infrastructure. In Gaza Israel acts directly, going after Hamas military figures and retaliating for rocket attacks originating from the Gaza Strip. Hamas, for its part, does not (and cannot) always stop groups like Palestine Islamic Jihad

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16 Christa Case Bryant, “Hamas unveils bigger, better rocket arsenal against Israel,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 July 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0709/Hamas-unveils-bigger-better-rocket-arsenal-against-Israel-video>.

from striking Israel. In addition, it uses attacks on Israel to establish its credibility when it faces economic and political difficulties.

Seemingly limited attacks from one side or the other – the killing of a key leader, or a few rocket attacks – can easily spiral out of control. Both sides feel the need to respond, and depending on the political circumstances either side might escalate.

Violence between Israel and Hamas further discredits moderate Palestinians in the long-term. Abbas and his cohorts often cheered Israel on from the sidelines in its various conflicts with Hamas. Ordinary Palestinians in the West Bank, however, saw the violence against their fellow Palestinians as abhorrent and blamed Abbas for collaborating with Israel. The biggest long-term danger for Israel is that Palestinian security forces stop cooperation with Israel, fearing that they would be considered accomplices to Israeli attacks on Palestinians. Such a risk is particularly likely should there be a leadership transition and various Palestinian leaders, including the heads of security forces, want to solidify their nationalist *bona fides*.

The United States and Europe should work together to politically strengthen moderate Palestinians like Abbas. Particularly important is thinking about the next generation of leaders given that significant progress is not likely in Abbas' political lifetime. When possible, Western states should take steps to encourage the PA to assume responsibility for Gaza and integrate Hamas unofficially in a set of moderate commitments and institution that will push the movement away from violence. For example, aid for reconstruction can and should be tied to efforts to ensure that the PA, not Hamas, is responsible for many of the benefits doled out.

A third *intifada* remains unlikely. Palestinians do not look back on the second *intifada* as a success. Even more important, the Israeli military and security forces are far more prepared for violence than they were in 2000 and would quickly reoccupy more of the West Bank and otherwise take steps to prevent violence from escalating dramatically.

However, the continued stagnation of talks and discrediting of moderates makes the resumption of the peace process more difficult in the future. Proponents of peace talks in the United States and the international community are hopeful that new leaders might be more willing to return to the table and propose serious concessions to make peace. However, in the interim facts on the ground in the form of settlements are growing. In addition, moderate forces are becoming politically weaker.

European states are likely to face tension with Washington over whether and how to move the peace process forward. If the United States is abandoning its traditional desire to be the leader of the peace process, it is unclear what the preferred U.S. policy will be instead.

The impact on the region is unclear. Although analysts have hotly debated the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian issue for the rest of the region, clearly the lack of resolution was at least one important source of regional unrest and often hostility to the West, contributing to terrorism and other problems. For the United States, the conflict often put it at odds between its regional allies and Israel, particularly when high-profile violence made it hard for allies to openly associate with Washington.

Today, however, the Israeli-Palestinian issue is less important in regional politics. The Syrian civil war and the growth of ISIS, the spread of civil strife in Yemen and Libya, the anti-Muslim Brotherhood campaign of Egypt and several Gulf states – all these are grabbing the passions

and attention of states and peoples in the region. Indeed, Israel's strong anti-Iran stance and hostility to Hamas is shared by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other regional states. So as the chances for resolution have declined, so too has the issue's political salience.

### 3. Foreign Fighters from Europe and the Arab World

Daniel Byman

Over 20,000 fighters from outside Iraq and Syria have joined the fighting there, supporting a range of Sunni militant groups, including ISIS.<sup>17</sup> Over 2,000 of these fighters are from Europe, with the bulk of the remaining fighters coming from the Arab world.<sup>18</sup> These fighters worsen the conflict in Iraq and Syria. They also pose a limited terrorism threat to the United States and Europe and are a far more dangerous concern for Arab states.

#### The Nature of the Threat

The threat of terrorism from foreign fighters is typically described with references to the Afghanistan conflict before 9/11. Under the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other groups hosted tens of thousands of fighters, some of whom went on to commit deadly terrorist attacks.

The Afghanistan model proceeded as follows: The conflict abroad radicalizes a segment of a Muslim community, convincing them to go to a war zone to fight. Often their motives are altruistic: they see fellow Muslims suffering, and they feel obliged to help. Once in the conflict zone, they became more dangerous in several ways. First, they learn valuable skills such as bomb-making, sharp-shooting, and clandestine communications that made them both more deadly and able to be part of a clandestine terrorist movement. In addition to these skills, the fighter becomes indoctrinated, taking on a broader anti-Western worldview that embraces multiple conflicts and multiple enemies. The individuals also gain access to a broader set of networks, enabling them to draw on a wide range of contacts for future attacks. Finally, they become tools of existing terrorist groups, which use them to achieve their ends: several of the 9/11 plotters, for example, were at first inspired to fight the Russians in Chechnya but were redirected when in Afghanistan. Scholars have found that the presence of a foreign fighter in a terrorist cell makes plotters both more likely to succeed and more deadly when they do strike.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Kukil Bora, "ISIS Continues Steady Recruitment As 20,000 Foreign Fighters Join Extremist Groups In Syria, Iraq: Report," *International Business Times*, 11 February 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-continues-steady-recruitment-20000-foreign-fighters-join-extremist-groups-syria-1812440>.

18 For a detailed breakdown of the number of foreign fighters and their countries of origin, see "Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 January 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/infographics/infographics/26584940.html>.

19 A more detailed explanation of this process can be found in Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," Policy Paper No. 24, *The Brookings Institution*, November 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/11/western%20foreign%20fighters%20in%20syria%20and%20iraq%20byman%20shapiro/be%20afraid%20%20web.pdf>.

The Syria and Iraq conflicts seem to fit this model in many ways. Social media allows ISIS and other groups to proselytize and convey instructions on how to join the group. The ease of transit to Syria, often via Turkey, makes it easy for volunteers to enter the fray. The recent increase in sectarian sentiments and even apocalypticism among Muslim populations makes it likely that the number of recruits will continue to grow.<sup>20</sup> In particular, the conflict has drawn more foreign fighters than Afghanistan, Iraq (after 2003), Somalia, Yemen, and other conflicts *combined*. So if even a small percentage radicalize further and engage in terrorism in their home countries, the danger is considerable.<sup>21</sup>

The foreign fighters also exacerbate the civil wars. The fighters provide fodder for militant groups, expanding the overall size of the armies. Moreover, although foreign fighters are only a fraction of total combatants, they tend to be among the most zealous fighters and compose a highly disproportionate number of suicide bombers. Some experts speculate they are more likely to commit atrocities given their zealotry and because they lack family or community ties in the conflict zone, enabling them to kill innocents without fear of reprisals. Finally, the presence of Sunni foreign fighters has justified an inflow of thousands of fighters from Shi'a groups in Iraq and the Lebanese Hizballah, and their presence in turn has led far more Sunnis to go and fight, worsening the sectarian dynamic and putting pressure on Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other states that use sectarian sentiment as part of their foreign policy.

## Why the Terrorist Threat May Be Overstated in Europe

The terrorist threat to Europe is real: it is likely that at least some of the thousands of foreigners from Europe who have gone to fight will try to conduct attacks on return, and as time goes on a few will inevitably succeed. Yet, as the paragraphs below discuss, there are reasons to think the danger is manageable.

Although Afghanistan is often cited as a model, it may be an outlier as many conflicts that drew foreign fighters did not produce large numbers of international terrorist attacks. The 2003 Iraq conflict generated similar warnings, with some analysts believing the terrorism problem would dwarf that of Afghanistan before 9/11. Yet foreign fighters from Iraq produced little terrorism in Europe. Somalia and Mali produced similar warnings yet did not produce significant violence outside the war zones.

Many of the most recent jihadist attacks in Europe are not linked directly to fighting in Iraq and Syria. The 2015 Charlie Hebdo killings, and the subsequent copycat attack on Copenhagen, involved individuals who had not fought in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, while the ISIS in particular seems to inspire individuals to take up arms and attack, these attacks are not linked to having gone abroad to fight but rather simply the inspiration of "lone wolves," a very different problem.

Looking closely at the cycle that produces foreign fighters shows why many do not engage in violence upon return. First, many who go to fight in Iraq and Syria are already radicalized: the experience abroad did not change their propensity to use violence. Indeed, a number of attacks in the West have involved individuals who considered going to Iraq and Syria but

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20 William McCants, "ISIS's apocalyptic warning in Libya," *Markaz*, 17 February 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/02/17-isis-libya-apocalyptic-executions-christians-egypt>.

21 Byman and Shapiro, "Be Afraid."

instead decided to attack at home: from the point of view of counterterrorism at home, it would have been better had they left to fight overseas. So while an attack from a returnee who was already radicalized would “count” as a foreign fighter attack, the reality is that fighting abroad would have had little impact.<sup>22</sup>

Of those who go to a conflict zone, many die – and thus do not return and carry out terrorist attacks. The mortality rates for foreign fighters in conflict zones vary considerably. Pre-9/11 Afghanistan was quite low, with less than 10 percent dying, while the figures for Chechnya were over 90 percent. It is too soon to say what the figure is for Iraq and Syria, but the violence is intense and many fighters will die there. In addition, groups like ISIS use foreigners to generate much of their suicide bombing capability, which they deploy on an industrial scale. Among those who survive, some will stay on to fight, either continuing the wars in Iraq and Syria or going on to new fields of jihad. These individuals may prove dangerous to the Arab world or in other conflict zones, but they will not return to Europe.

Many of those who return will not use violence. Some will come back disillusioned from the war, having seen mainly carnage against innocent Muslims instead of the heroic resistance they thought they were joining. In particular, the infighting among jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS has soured some volunteers: they came to defend their community, not to kill like-minded fighters in a brutal power struggle.

Nor do the motivations for going to Syria easily translate into a European environment. Many of those who went see violence in the Syria context as a legitimate part of a sectarian struggle or as a way of defending their community against a brutal dictator. This justification is lacking in a Western European context.

Although ISIS is monstrous, the terrorism risk it poses differs from that of Al Qaeda in the past (or even today). ISIS seeks to build, well, an Islamic State and focuses its attention on securing territory in Iraq and Syria and then expanding it. Al Qaeda, in contrast, prioritized attacks in the West. So when foreign fighters or other resources come into ISIS's control, they are primarily used to fight in the local struggle. ISIS is continuing the path of its predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq, which prioritized attacks in Iraq and did not fully embrace international terrorism despite being attacked by Western forces. However, ISIS propaganda has recently encouraged attacks in the West, so this focus may be changing. A particular danger are so-called “lone wolves” who are less likely to be known to security services and who find the propaganda compelling. They may pose less of a strategic risk, as they tend to be unskilled and they find it difficult to conduct repeated attacks or align their operations with the goals of foreign terrorist groups. However, they can still kill and sow mayhem.

Perhaps most importantly, Western security services are focused on the threat and are on high alert. A number of European states dealt with a surge in terrorism or terrorism fears after 9/11 and in the aftermath of deadly attacks in London and Madrid. Police and government agencies have ties to Muslim communities, and intelligence services have penetrated them. The recent attacks in France and Denmark, though not directly linked to foreign fighters, have likely increased alert levels and made additional resources available for counterterrorism officials.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Indeed, going to Syria often makes an individual *more* likely to be discovered. By traveling to Syria, an individual puts himself in the “high risk” category for terrorism officials. They may learn about the recruit from their local communities or from assets in the conflict zone. In addition, foreign fighters often use Facebook, Twitter, and other social media to advertise their role. They see themselves as heroes open defending their communities, not as terrorists, and as such do not hide their role.

## Why Foreign Fighters Are So Dangerous to the Arab World

Perhaps 20,000 Arab volunteers have gone to fight in Syria. Few countries are spared: long-standing jihadist hotbed Saudi Arabia is as always a reliable supplier of fighters, but so too are countries far from Syria and Iraq like Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco.

In contrast to Europe, the Arab world faces more than a risk of terrorist attacks.<sup>23</sup> If we return to the Afghanistan model, the anti-Soviet struggle and the chaos that followed there played an important role not only in creating Al Qaeda but also fostering jihadist groups around the Muslim world. Struggles in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere received a boost, with some becoming more violent and more radical. In other conflicts, such as the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, fighters from the Arab world flocked to join the fray, but it did not have such far-reaching consequences.

Several countries in the Arab world, notably Libya and Lebanon, face considerable risk of bleedout from returning fighters and several more face more modest dangers, particularly Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. This in turn is a danger to European economic and political interests in these countries. However, there is no simple model of bleedout, in part because the groups in Syria and Iraq, and the global jihadist movement in general, are divided as to focus and strategy. In addition, different countries have different mitigating factors.

In particular, the presence or absence of strong and focused security services will have a profound impact on the risk of bleedout. The security services of many Arab states are excellent. Indeed, there is a Darwinian aspect to this: countries that lack strong security services often fall victim to a coup or rebellion. Yet a closer look reveals how uneven this competence is. Jordan and Saudi Arabia have impressive services, but Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, and several other states have services that are far less skilled. Several of these countries already have a problem with jihadist violence, and there is little reason to think they have the capacity to closely track the volunteers to Iraq and Syria, either when they leave or when they return. Even some of the countries like Egypt that have strong services are more focused on domestic threats like the Muslim Brotherhood than on the potential threat from returning foreign fighters.

Although many countries are at risk of violence, the strategic impact of returning fighters is likely to be limited in most countries. Militarily and tactically they can create new groups or strengthen existing ones; however, their ambition, regional focus, lack of discipline, and brutality often mean they create more enemies than they vanquish and anger local populations, strengthening the government's hand. They may use terrorism (indeed, this is likely), but it will be locally and regionally focused, with international terrorism probably less of a priority.

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23 Daniel Byman, “The Foreign Policy Essay: The Arab World's Foreign Fighter Problem,” *Lawfare*, 19 October 2014, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/10/the-foreign-policy-essay-the-arab-worlds-foreign-fighter-problem/>.

However, in countries that have multiple competing jihadist organizations, the risk of violence and terrorism are greater, as groups compete with one another for attention and recruits. Countries like Libya and Lebanon that have weak governments are particularly vulnerable. In Lebanon the returnees might foster a cycle of sectarian violence, targeting their arch-enemy Hizballah and its Shi'a constituency. In Libya, the Islamic State as an idea is attracting recruits: though their operational ties to the core organization seem limited, a new level of savagery is emerging.

Terrorism and low-level strife can derail successful democratization and otherwise weaken government. Violence inhibits foreign investment, making economic recovery more difficult. As violence persists, communities lose faith in the national government and rely on local tribes and militias to defend themselves, perpetuating government weakness. These in turn can increase the likelihood of civil wars.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

In Europe, some degree of terrorism linked to foreign fighters is probably unavoidable. A first step is to prepare populations for some attacks and not overreact when they occur. Right-wing terrorism is also a tremendous problem in Europe, and the violence levels from jihadist terrorism so far are below the levels in the years following 9/11. Governments should emphasize that violence remains limited even as they try to reassure frightened populations.

European security services need resources. Keeping track of foreign fighters is personnel intensive. Services need to identify recruits who have gone to fight and learn their behavior when abroad. When they return, a determination must be made about the risk they pose, with some being jailed. Indeed, a problem for security services apparent from the 2015 attacks is that they diverted resources from known jihadist threats to focus on foreign fighters, potentially missing opportunities to stop the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen.

Fighting for ISIS is wrong and a criminal act in almost every country, but systematically prosecuting and jailing returnees, as France does, is a mistake. Even by the lowest possible standard – that of terrorist groups – ISIS is brutal and evil, and Western governments should try to weaken this group whenever possible. More pointedly, a terrorist who carried out an attack after security services had passed on a chance to arrest him would embarrass the security services and enrage the public.

However, prosecuting all returnees, even those whose time on the battlefield was brief and inconsequential, offers a false sense of finality. Jail time is often short, so the ISIS volunteer does not simply rot his life away. He may soon pose an even greater threat, particularly because in prison, he is often exposed to hardened jihadists and radical religious leaders. This is what happened with the Charlie Hebdo killers: prison made the problem worse. In addition, when an individual on the fence knows he will face imprisonment upon return, he may feel he has less to lose by moving toward terrorism at home, and his family will fear that working with authorities will lead to punishment rather than leniency. When jihadist networks see their members systematically targeted, some may decide to focus their energies on their home governments rather than the struggle in Syria and Iraq.

Such coercive measures can also create “suspect communities” where radicalization is more likely and where community members are less likely to work with the police and government in general. Parents who fear that their children will be arrested will be less likely to seek out the help of the police.



Governments should also put resources into community programs to prevent individuals from going to Iraq and Syria and then deradicalizing them upon return. It is vital to identify individuals engaged in high-risk but legal behavior (e.g. using social media to display sympathy toward a jihadist group) and work with community leaders to move them off a radical path. These leaders will also be vital in working with returnees and identifying the most dangerous. Some fighters will have been traumatized from their experience, and they may use violence if they did not receive support.

In both the Arab world and in Europe, governments can reduce the risk of bleedout by hindering the travel of volunteers and constraining their ability to organize. Turkey is a particularly important hub for Western fighters, and Ankara has been slow to secure its borders. Concerted European pressure on Turkey in conjunction with America would be important to changing Turkey's policies. So far, Turkey has resisted pressure and has not made dramatic changes.<sup>24</sup> Western states should publicly highlight Turkey's inadequacies to shame the government as quiet pressure has failed. In addition, they should threaten travel restrictions as a way of putting pressure on the Turkish economy.

At home, reducing the number of volunteers also involves legal measures against recruiters. Also necessary is developing a counternarrative to combat the radicals' message. A particularly important counternarrative is to stress the internecine violence among jihadists: governments need to make it clear that volunteers are often with groups killing other Sunni Muslims, not Shiites or Westerners.

Western countries should also focus on reintegration of less-dangerous foreign fighters upon return. Given the scale of the foreign fighter flow, and given that many young volunteers who return are traumatized or disillusioned with fighting, a triage program is necessary to separate those who must be arrested immediately from those for whom other programs are necessary. Western intelligence and community services should work together, focusing on factors such as which group an individual fought with, previous violent behavior, and other signs of radicalization.

In the Arab world, regimes are also likely to take advantage of the jihadists' presence to gain more support from the United States and Europe, citing the danger of terrorism to gain resources. They will also delay democratic reforms in the name of counterterrorism, and crackdown on non-jihadist opposition, particularly Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Such efforts may drive the Brotherhood and others into violence, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The intelligence ramifications are also considerable. Improving intelligence sharing is vital for speedy action, and the United States can play an important facilitating role. Analysts should also seek to identify likely alternative locations for foreign fighters should their return home be blocked or simply because some fighters will go from jihad to jihad. From a counter-intelligence point of view, groups in Syria are highly vulnerable and can be persuaded to exclude or otherwise suspect foreign volunteers.

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24 Yaroslav Trofimov, "Porous Syria-Turkey Border Poses Challenge in Fight Against Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, 19 February 2015, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/10/the-foreign-policy-essay-the-arab-worlds-foreign-fighter-problem/>.

## 4. Religion Matters: How Islam Relates to Politics

Shadi Hamid

In debates in Europe and the United States, among social scientists and policymakers alike, there has often been a tendency to see religion, ideology, and identity as “epiphenomenal” — products of a given set of material factors. These factors are the things we can touch, grasp, and measure. For example, when explaining why suicide bombers do what they do, we assume that these are young men who are depressed about their own failures, frustrated with a dire economic situation, or angry about political repression and foreign occupation. While these are all undoubtedly factors, they aren’t the whole story.

In a September 2014 statement, ISIS spokesman Abu Mohamed al-Adnani expounded on the group’s inherent advantage: “Being killed... is a victory,” he said. “You fight a people who can never be defeated. They either gain victory or are killed.”<sup>25</sup> In this most basic sense, religion matters and it matters a great deal. As individuals, ISIS fighters are not only willing to die in a blaze of religious ecstasy; they welcome it. It doesn’t particularly matter if this sounds absurd to us. It’s what *they* believe. But this basic point about intention and motivation doesn’t just apply to extremist groups, but also to mainstream Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood that work within the democratic process, contest elections, and adopt a gradualist model of Islamizing society. As one Brotherhood official put it to me, many join the movement “so they can get into heaven.” Discussing his own reasons for joining the organization, he explained: “I was far from religion and this was unsettling. Islamists resolved it for me.”<sup>26</sup>

It would be a mistake, then, to view mainstream Islamist movements as traditional political parties. Muslim Brotherhood branches and affiliates are not just acting for this world, but also for the next. They aim to strengthen the religious character of individuals through a multi-tiered membership system and an extensive educational process with a structured curriculum. Each Brother is part of a “family,” usually consisting of 5 to 10 members who meet on a weekly basis to read and discuss religious texts. For many members, it is quite simple and straightforward. Being a part of the Brotherhood helps them obey God, become better Muslims, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of entry into paradise and eternal salvation. This doesn’t mean that a given member doesn’t care about politics; but he or she may see political action — whether running for a municipal council seat or joining a mass protest — as just another way of serving God and seeking his pleasure.

The tendency to see religion through the prism of politics or economics (rather than the other way around) isn’t necessarily incorrect, but it can sometimes obscure the independent power of ideas that seem, to much of the Western world, quaint and archaic. For those

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25 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “In Rabbik bi-l-Mursad,” September 2014, English translation available here: [https://archive.org/stream/Mirsad\\_T/English\\_Translation\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/Mirsad_T/English_Translation_djvu.txt).

26 Interview with Muslim Brotherhood official, August 9, 2010.

who no longer see the relevance of religion in everyday life, it can be difficult to understand how people are able and willing to do seemingly irrational things in the service of seemingly irrational ends. The forces of reason and rationality, if they haven't already prevailed, are supposed to prevail *eventually*. The modern Middle East seems to defy such expectations. As Robert Kagan writes: "For a quarter-century, Americans have been told that at the end of history lies boredom rather than great conflict."<sup>27</sup> Francis Fukuyama, the very scholar who first proclaimed the "end of history," seemed almost wistful by that famous essay's final paragraph. "I have the most ambivalent feelings for the civilization that has been created in Europe since 1945," he wrote. "Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again." In this sense, Fukuyama was more prescient than his critics give him credit for.

The dramatic rise of ISIS is only the most striking example of the way in which liberal determinism – the notion that history moves with intent toward a more reasonable, secular future – has failed to explain Middle East realities. Of course, the overwhelming majority of Muslims do not share ISIS's view of religion, but that's not really the most interesting or relevant question. ISIS, after all, draws on, and draws strength from, ideas that have a broad resonance among Muslim-majority populations. They may not agree with ISIS's interpretation of the caliphate, but the notion of a caliphate – the historical political entity governed by Islamic law and tradition – is a powerful one, even among more secular-minded Muslims. A 2007 poll of Muslims in the Middle East, South Asia, and Indonesia found that two thirds of respondents favored the unification of "all Islamic countries into a single Islamic state, or caliphate."<sup>28</sup> The caliphate, which was dissolved unceremoniously only a century ago, is a reminder of how one of the world's great civilizations endured one of the most precipitous declines in human history. The gap between what Muslims once were and where they now find themselves is at the center of the anger and humiliation that drive political violence across the Middle East. But there is also a sense of loss and longing for an organic legal and political order that succeeded for centuries before its slow but decisive dismantling. Ever since, Muslims, and particularly Arab Muslims, have been struggling to define the contours of an appropriate post-caliphate political order. ISIS is only the latest but perhaps the most frightening manifestation of this ongoing, bloody struggle.

Because of the role that religion has played and continues to play in the Middle East, trying to draw parallels with other regions has its limitations. What about comparing the role that Islam plays in today's Middle East to the role Christianity played in medieval Europe? Here, too, the differences, drawn out over centuries, make themselves apparent. The early Christian community, as Princeton historian Michael Cook notes, "lacked a conception of an intrinsically Christian state" and was willing to coexist with and even recognize Roman law.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, among others, the equivalent of ISIS simply couldn't exist in Christian-majority societies. Neither would the pragmatic, mainstream Islamist movements that *oppose* ISIS and its idiosyncratic, totalitarian take on the Islamic polity. While they have little in common with Islamist extremists, in both means and ends, the Muslim Brotherhood and its many descendants and affiliates do have a particular vision for society that puts Islam and Islamic law at the

27 Robert Kagan, "America's Dangerous Aversion to Conflict," *Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/robert-kagan-why-the-u-s-wants-to-avoid-conflict-1409942201>.

28 Steven Kull, "Muslim Public Opinion on US Policy, Attacks on Civilians, and al Qaeda," *World Public Opinion*, April 24, 2007, [http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START\\_Apr07\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START_Apr07_rpt.pdf).

29 Michael Cook, *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

center of public life. The vast majority of Western Christians – including committed conservatives – cannot conceive of a comprehensive legal-social order anchored by religion. However, according to considerable survey data, the vast majority of, say, Egyptians and Jordanians can and do.

## Foundational Divides

The role of religion – for both its political partisans and those who fear its insertion into everyday political life – has become the primary political cleavage among parties in many Middle Eastern countries (although it overlaps, to various degrees, with economic, class, and even linguistic cleavages). Party systems are products of a country's particular history. Over time, they become entrenched and self-sustaining. What happens at the start of the democratization process is not incidental, nor can it be easily reversed. This is what makes transitional periods particularly tense and polarizing. Yet, transitions in the Middle East, whether successful or failed, have proven more polarizing than the norm, and this is where the nature of *foundational* divides become critical.

At this juncture, cleavages along religious/identity/ideological lines are unlikely to fade to the background. If anything, they have solidified in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey and intensified and become dominant in Libya. In Syria and Yemen, ideological cleavages have also grown in importance, although the picture there is somewhat more complicated due to longstanding sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shias. Yet, in all of these cases, and in all of their diversity, the divides in question are *foundational* – having to do with the nature, meaning, and purpose of the modern nation-state.

In this way, democratic transitions in the Middle East have proven “exceptional.” In Eastern Europe, transitions became possible when the dominant ideology was discredited by the demise of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, in Latin America, the primary cleavages were largely economic in nature. During transitions in Brazil, Chile and Argentina, the leftist opposition could reassure regime elites that their financial interests would be protected. In the Middle East, there was no such resolution, and with the exception of Tunisia democratic systems are not taking root.

“On matters of economic policy and social expenditures you can always split the difference,”<sup>30</sup> the political scientist Dankwart Rustow once wrote. How, though, do you split the difference on religion? Attitudes, in this respect, are “inelastic,” meaning that what Islamists did or didn't do would have little effect on how their opponents viewed them. What frightened secularists in countries like Tunisia and Egypt (and increasingly Turkey) most wasn't necessarily what Islamists had already done, but what they might do at some unspecified point in the future. One of the Turkish President's chief advisors made this point to me in a recent interview in Ankara. President Erdogan had initiated a series of policy changes to the benefit of the Alevi community, but “not even one Alevi votes for him.”<sup>31</sup> As a result, there is less incentive to move to the center, because the center is weak and the Turkish center has, in fact, grown weaker the longer the democratic experience.

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30 Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics*, 2 (April 1970), 359.

31 Interview with senior advisor to President Erdogan, Ankara, February 20, 2015.

In transitioning countries, particularly poorer ones like Egypt and Tunisia, one might have expected class and economic appeals to grow in relevance, yet this did not occur. To be sure, voters, when asked what issues are most important to them, will list employment, a better standard of living, and so on. Questions of shariah, meanwhile, seemed beside the point, having little effect on the daily challenges they faced. But it does not necessarily follow that they will vote accordingly. To make a decision to vote for one party over another, one has to be able to draw distinctions between them. Yet the major parties and movements, whether Islamist or liberal, had little to say about the economy beyond the self-evident. Who, after all, could take issue with fighting unemployment and combating poverty? With few exceptions, parties' economic programs offered variations on the same theme: market-driven growth coupled with protections for the poor and social justice for all. Ironically, in Egypt, the country with perhaps the most acute economic challenges, it was leftist rather than liberal parties that did the worst in the parliamentary elections. To the extent that economics mattered in the elections, it was often in the form of old fashioned patronage, such as when the Brotherhood launched the "millioniyat al-khayr" initiative on the eve of parliamentary elections, providing 1.5 million kilos of meat to 5 million Egyptians.<sup>32</sup>

The choices of the largest political parties tend to set the contours of the political debate, forcing competitors to react and respond. Islamist parties had never been known for focusing much attention on economic policy. To the extent they did, they promoted a surprisingly free market oriented economic vision, something that was likely to play well with investors rather than voters. Meanwhile, because their economic platforms differed little from those of their Islamist counterparts, liberal and leftist parties found themselves constrained. And, in any case, their own economic vision, beyond the broad outlines, was similarly underdeveloped. Identity, on the other hand, was easy to argue. The lines seemed less ambiguous.

The role of foundational divides has implications for how we understand the use of violence in the Middle East. When observers imply that Arabs or Muslims are prone to violence, they're usually thinking of groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda. But the preponderance of Arab violence has come at the hands of ostensibly secular regimes that claim to be responding *against* Islamist movements: Bashar al-Asad has killed far more civilians than has ISIS, however horrific the latter's atrocities are. This, though, does not entirely absolve religion or ideology. To be sure, secular autocrats are guarding privilege and power, but the liberal elites upon whose support they depend are well aware that there is more at stake. It is only in such a context that the near unanimous embrace of the overthrow of a democratically elected president – one who was unabashedly Islamist – makes sense. The anti-Islamists who lined up behind the military in Egypt and those in Tunisia who threatened to dissolve both the democratically elected government and constituent assembly had decided that some things took precedence over any presumed commitment to democracy. They feared that Islamist rule, however "democratic" it might be, would alter the very nature of their countries beyond recognition. And it wouldn't just affect their governments or their laws – although that would be bad enough – but also how they lived, what they wore, how they raised their sons and daughters, maybe even what they could and couldn't drink. It was personal.

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32 See Laila Fadel, "Muslim Brotherhood sells cheap food ahead of holiday and Egypt parliament vote," *Washington Post*, November 4, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/muslim-brotherhood-sells-cheap-food-ahead-of-holiday-and-egypt-parliament-vote/2011/11/05/gIQAQD2PqM\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/muslim-brotherhood-sells-cheap-food-ahead-of-holiday-and-egypt-parliament-vote/2011/11/05/gIQAQD2PqM_story.html); and *Ikhwan Online*, October 25, 2011, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?SecID=211&ArtID=93919>.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

Because religion matters more in the Middle East, politics also matters – or at least should matter – more. By “politics,” I mean the efforts of both domestic and international actors to channel, constrain, and otherwise mitigate the deep polarization that threatens to tear states apart. Here, insights from consociational democratic theory may be helpful.

It is difficult to imagine it now, but continental Europe struggled with foundational divides, with periodic warnings of civil war, as recently as the 1950s. Countries like Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, and the Netherlands were divided into ideologically opposed sub-cultures, sometimes called “spiritual families” or “pillars.” These countries, though, became models of “consociational democracy,” where the subcultures agreed to share power through creative arrangements. For example, in Austria, something called the “coalition committee,” in which socialist and Catholic leaders were equally represented, made the most sensitive decisions, while in Switzerland, the four largest parties were guaranteed representation in the executive branch.

To be sure, the specific arrangements that brought success in Europe are not easily applied in the Middle East, due, again, to the region’s religious and ideological “exceptionalism.” Countries like Egypt or Tunisia may seem homogenous – the vast majority, after all, belong to one ethnicity, one sect, and one religion – but in some ways this makes the problem all the more vexing. Consociational democracy works best when there are multiple centers of power in society, none of which, on its own, is strong enough to dominate. In much of the Arab world, however, both Islamists and non-Islamists believe they represent the “true” majority of citizens. Unlike in Belgium, where there are distinct groups of Flemish and Walloon that can be clearly identified, Islamists and non-Islamists are different, but not different enough.

With Shia and Sunni or Muslims and Christians, there is little doubt about who is what. The lines are drawn quite clearly for those who want to see them. But what about when the enemy is a brother or a daughter or a father? As Arend Lijphart, the leading scholar of consociational democracy, wrote in a classic 1959 article, competing subcultures in countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland were minority groups which had little, if any hope, of becoming majorities. Rather than imposing their will on the nation, they were more interested in autonomy and promoting their own communal interests as they saw fit. Each subculture had its own schools, institutions, hospitals, businesses, and were, to an extent, geographically segmented. It helped that Catholics could, for the most part, avoid interacting with Socialists. “Subcultures with widely divergent outlooks and interests may coexist without necessarily being in conflict,” writes Lijphart. “Conflict arises only when they are in contact with each other.” Lijphart sometimes refers to this as “a kind of voluntary apartheid policy.”<sup>33</sup> But separation, voluntary or forced, requires separate parts. And those separate parts simply do not exist in many Middle East countries.

This not particularly inspiring idea – that the more people interact, the more they dislike each other – undermines a core tenet of modern liberalism: if only opposing sides – whether racial groups, communities, or even world leaders – talked to each other in good faith, then reason would prevail. This idea inspires our rounds of diplomacy and our educational exchange programs. This faith in our better angels is commendable (and probably a good way to lead

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33 Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy,” *World Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, January 1959.



a happier life) but that doesn't necessarily make it an accurate reflection of the live as it's lived and politics as it's practiced. Reducing contact between opposing sides and allowing for autonomous institutions and communities may, in fact, be ways of accepting that some differences cannot be bridged. The best that can be done is to manage them. This is more difficult in mixed communities, where divides are within the family. But even here, recognizing foundational divides and taking that as a starting point is probably a more fruitful approach to hopefully, one day, transcending them. To put it a little bit differently, people can hate each other all they want – as long as they agree to hate each other *within the political process*, rather than outside of it.

The Middle East of course had one consociational democracy – Lebanon – and it has suffered numerous problems. Two stand out as we consider lessons for other states. First, the political system reinforced existing cleavages. Rather than create a “Lebanese” identity that transcended sectarian differences, the political system made that identity even weaker. Second, by definition the government in a consociational system is weak: a strong government, after all, could trample on communities if it became controlled by one social group. So Lebanon was vulnerable to intervention from both state actors (Syria and Israel, among others) as well as non-state ones, such as Palestinian militant groups in the 1970s.

Insights and lessons from successful consociational democracies, even if they don't fit perfectly, offer crucial insights on lessening the winner-takes-all nature of Middle East politics. The basic principles are simple enough: do as much as possible to share, disperse, restrain, and decentralize power. Extra care must be given to ensure electoral minorities have a stake in the system so that when they lose they have less incentive to renege on the democratic process. In practice, this can mean:

1. Adopting a “pure” parliamentary system with a weak, mostly ceremonial president.  
A powerful president can easily become a lightning rod for the opposition. Because it is all or nothing – only one president, after all, can win – it heightens the existential feel of political competition. A parliamentary system invests power in a prime minister, who can much more easily be removed if voters feel buyer's remorse. And parliaments require working political parties, and parties, rather than individuals, are much better at aggregating and channeling the desires of supporters.
2. More creatively, at the start of a transition, opposing parties can agree to “postpone” debates on divisive ideological issues – such as on Islamizing the legal or educational systems – for a set period of time. Such an interim period would regularize democratic competition to the extent that it becomes the “only game in town.” At the conclusion of the period, the existing democratic process would be better equipped to withstand ideological polarization, including on perennial touchstones like restricting alcohol consumption and co-education, empowering religious scholars, or reforming the educational curricula.
3. Extra care must be taken with the local security environment. These states will be less able to defend their borders and ensure security because of a consociational-like system and may need additional outside assistance.
4. Ultimately, though, foundational questions over the role of Islam and Islamic law cannot be placed gently to the side indefinitely. They will have to be addressed and democratic outcomes will have to be respected. In conservative societies – and even in less conservative ones such as Turkey – a growing role for religion may be unavoidable. If there is enough of a demand for Islamization, then someone will have to supply it. And it's worth noting that Islamization does not necessarily require Islamists. Democratization not only pushes

Islamists toward greater conservatism; it can skew the entire political spectrum rightwards. Ostensibly secular parties may feel compelled to adopt religious rhetoric and pass “Islamic” legislation to win over devout voters and outbid their Islamist competition, as is the case in Malaysia and Pakistan



## 5. “Regionalization” of Local Conflict

Shadi Hamid

In the post-Arab Spring period, a process of the *regionalization of local conflict* has gained momentum. This is an inversion of what many analysts expected, and therefore deserves special attention.<sup>34</sup> At the start of the Arab uprisings, each individual country seemed embroiled in its own distinctive power battles. The role of proxies and international intervention was still limited, as regional and international powers, caught off guard, struggled to recalibrate their policies in light of the changes underway. For example, Saudi Arabia, despite seeing Islamist groups like the Brotherhood as a major threat, reluctantly accepted – or at least seemed to accept – the election of Mohamed Morsi to the Egyptian presidency.

In this respect, the July 3, 2013 military coup in Egypt is an important point of departure, where Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates played a significant role in supporting the Egyptian military, particularly during a critical period from July 3 to August 14, when the United States and the European Union attempted to broker a resolution to the standoff between the army and the Brotherhood. As the *New York Times* reported: “While the Qataris and Emiratis talked about ‘reconciliation’ in front of the Americans, Western diplomats here said they believed the Emiratis were privately urging the Egyptian security forces to crack down.”<sup>35</sup>

In just a few months, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait pumped in more than 10 billion dollars in an attempt to stabilize a struggling economy under the rule of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.<sup>36</sup> What had initially been portrayed as a battle between Egyptians – Islamists versus non-Islamists – was now embedded in a broader and more complex struggle over the very shape of the regional order. Here, a domestic Islamist-secular divide was reinforced and amplified by a regional cold war between the conservative status-quo bloc of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait as well as Jordan and Morocco – with Israel as a tacit (or actual) ally – and a pro-Islamist bloc of Turkey and Qatar. On the regional level, Saudi Arabia, itself more than comfortable with an outsized role for religion in politics, didn’t have a problem with Islamism as such but with the Brotherhood’s particular brand of it.

Saudi Arabia, as theocratic as it might be, may promote different strains of Salafism and Wahhabism throughout the Muslim world but it is (generally) a firm defender of the existing nation-state system. What it fears are groups that are in some way transnational and

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34 Of course, the Middle East has seen this problem before: pan-Arabism led states to meddle in local conflicts far from their borders, and Khomeini’s Iran both supported faraway groups and prompted responses from its rivals.

35 David D. Kirkpatrick, Peter Baker, and Michael R. Gordon, “How American Hopes for a Deal in Egypt were Undercut,” *The New York Times*, 17 August 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/world/middleeast/pressure-by-us-failed-to-sway-egypts-leaders.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/world/middleeast/pressure-by-us-failed-to-sway-egypts-leaders.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

36 Ayah Aman, “Gulf states to cut aid to Egypt,” *Al Monitor*, 17 February 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/egypt-gulf-aid-economy-conference.html>.

therefore have the intellectual and political resources to challenge the regional order as it is currently constructed, especially if that involves groups seen as hostile to the Kingdom. Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood has also heightened Saudi and Emirati fears, feeding into yet another regionalized proxy battle.

The Brotherhood, with affiliates and descendants across the Middle East, is the only organized region-wide force articulating both an alternative religious and political legitimacy. This, however, should not be exaggerated. Muslim Brotherhood international has limited authority over branches, which diverge considerably in their behavior based on local circumstances. In Algeria, Kuwait,<sup>37</sup> and Iraq, Brotherhood organizations have either defied binding authority of the international organization or lost status as formal Brotherhood affiliates.

What is more important than formal linkages or direction, however, is a shared solidarity and a shared model of change, which offers not just Islamism but an Islamism realized through mass political participation and democratic elections. While the Brotherhood and its ilk may be deeply illiberal, they are committed to pursuing that illiberalism through the democratic process (I discuss the tensions between liberalism and democracy in my recent book *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East*<sup>38</sup>). This prioritization of elections is a direct challenge to the Saudi regime. Regarding religious legitimacy, Saudi Arabia is the custodian of the two holy mosques, seeing itself as the seat of Sunni Islam. More importantly, its internal security is intrinsically tied to the religious legitimacy – based on history and theology – that it claims for itself. That the Brotherhood claims not just a distinct religious legitimacy but seeks to do so through democratic elections represents a kind of double threat.

The regionalization of local conflict is perhaps most striking in Libya. Libya was supposed to be different – ideological divides were less pronounced, and the country's geographic isolation meant that other states did not have the same history of meddling as was true of many neighbors. It seemed unlikely that the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood would be able to repeat the feat of other Islamist parties across the region, which had quickly risen to power. There hadn't traditionally been a secular elite as in Egypt or Tunisia, and even "secular" parties like Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance were more than comfortable speaking the language of religion and Islamic law. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood simply had less traction because they weren't as distinctive – regional and tribal divides took precedence. But as the Libyan Brotherhood, which could claim an organizational coherence that others couldn't, grew more powerful, the fears of Islamist takeover of the state grew along with it.<sup>39</sup>

The "Egyptianization" of the Libyan conflict brought yet another general, Khalifa Hefatar, to newfound prominence. Hefatar claimed to speak for something called the "Supreme Council of the Armed Forces," sharing a name with the military body that had ousted President Mohammed Morsi just a year before. Taking another cue from Egypt, Hefatar appeared on television in February to announce a "roadmap" for saving Libya from Islamist militias and

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37 For further reading on the status of the Muslim Brotherhood on the Gulf, see Kristin Smith Diwan, "The future of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf," *Washington Post*, 10 February 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/10/the-future-of-the-muslim-brotherhood-in-the-gulf/>.

38 Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

39 Mary Fitzgerald, "Libya's Muslim Brotherhood struggles to grow," *Foreign Policy*, 1 May 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/01/libyas-muslim-brotherhood-struggles-to-grow/>.

politicians. In May, after gathering more support, forces loyal to Heftar attacked the General National Congress building. Heftar fashioned himself as a strongman savior bearing good tidings of stability and security after a destabilizing democratic process. In this respect, Egypt has been an inspiration to its neighbors, but not necessarily in the way one might have hoped.

On the other hand, there has been at least one example – Tunisia – where “regionalization” has had a seemingly positive effect. Tunisia, like Libya, saw the rise of groups that used the names of their Egyptian counterparts – the Salvation Front and Tunisian Tamarrod. With much of the secular opposition calling for the dissolution of the elected constituent assembly or the elected government, or both, the prospect of an Egypt-like scenario was not necessarily far-fetched. In my recent conversations with Ennahda leaders, including leader Rachid Ghannouchi, the Egyptian coup was often cited as a key moment for the party’s strategy.<sup>40</sup> One Ennahda figure, who lived in exile for most of her life, described the Tunisian predicament as two high-speed trains – Islamists and secular hardliners – hurtling toward each other.<sup>41</sup> Someone had to choose another, safer path. And so Ennahda opted not to run a presidential candidate. Not only that, they didn’t even endorse a candidate. Then there was the odd spectacle, in the parliamentary elections, of the losing party celebrating its loss, not too dissimilar from the pre-Arab Spring phenomenon of Islamist parties “losing on purpose.”<sup>42</sup>

The fear of repression would have been there regardless but it was magnified by what Ennahda’s cautious leaders saw in Egypt, and this animated them. A return to the old authoritarianism had to be avoided at any and all costs, even if that meant conceding their Islamism, downplaying revolutionary fervor, and generally de-emphasizing their ideological distinctiveness.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

The cases of Tunisia and Libya – which were once thought to be strategically less important countries – illustrate the changing regional dynamics of the Middle East. It is impossible to understand local dynamics in a given country without understanding how they are embedded in broader regional conflicts over the Middle Eastern order, now that the “regionalization” of conflict has been underway for several years. Much of this is driven by states, including a resurgent GCC led by Saudi Arabia, but non-state actors have also had to respond accordingly, contributing to a troubling feedback loop. Among mainstream Islamist groups, there is now a shared sense of solidarity and struggle in the face of what they see as a hostile regional and international environment. Each local Brotherhood branch has faced existential moments previously, but this is the first time that the challenge has extended to so many of them at the same time. After the Egyptian coup, a series of “strategy” meetings were held in Istanbul in the fall of 2013 that included not just Egyptian Islamists, but Turkish, Syrian, and Kuwaiti ones as well.

In my recent interviews in London and Istanbul, Muslim Brotherhood figures discussed the possibility of Muslim Brotherhood International playing a more robust coordinating role. However, after being little more than a shell, this is easier said than done, especially

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40 Interview with Rachid Ghannouchi, Tunis, February 13, 2015.

41 Interview with Ennahda member of parliament Sayida Ounissi, Tunis, February 6, 2015.

42 For more on this phenomenon, see Shadi Hamid, “Arab Islamist Parties: Losing on Purpose?” *Journal of Democracy* 22 (January 2011): pp. 68–80.

as different Islamist groups have interpreted the lessons of Egypt in rather divergent ways. Feeling increasingly threatened, and mired in a very different, and often violent, context, the Libyan Brotherhood opted to ally with local militias, while Tunisian Islamists, as we have seen, doubled down on a path of compromise and pre-emptive concession.

Looking more broadly, from a Western policy perspective, the discussion above dovetails with a larger debate over the role of international actors in a post-Arab Spring era. From the start of the Arab uprisings in January 2011, there was a tendency to discount, or at least underplay, the importance of external factors. Senior U.S. and European officials emphasized that the protests were a truly indigenous movement and that any foreign interference would go against the very spirit of the revolutions. Obama, Secretary Clinton, and other repeatedly insisted that this was not about America. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked, “These revolutions are not ours. They are not by us, for us, or against us.”

Yet these early years of the Arab uprisings tell a story largely at odds with the predominant narrative that external actors can and should play only a quiet, supporting role. With the exception of Tunisia, each of the five “revolutions” (as well as the one near-revolution in Bahrain) has been notable for their heavy regional and international footprint. In Libya, Yemen, and Syria, Western and regional powers in the Gulf played decisive roles. In the one stalled revolution – Bahrain – it was Saudi Arabia’s military intervention that helped quell the uprising and kept the ruling family afloat. Even in Egypt, the 2011 uprising was effectively internationalized, with foreign media devoting countless hours to covering every turn and, in the process, putting the issue at the top of the Western policy agenda. Here, as we saw above, the role of regional actors proved critical in the lead-up to and aftermath of the July 3, 2013 overthrow of Morsi, with another set of regional actors – Qatar and Turkey – hoping to shore up the Brotherhood government but ultimately failing

These developments are not entirely surprising. In recent years, a growing academic literature has pointed to the role of international actors in promoting democracy abroad. In their book *Competitive Authoritarianism*, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way provide extensive empirical support to argue that “it was an externally driven shift in the cost of suppression, not changes in domestic conditions, that contributed most centrally to the demise of authoritarianism in the 1980s and 1990s.” Levitsky and Way find that “states’ vulnerability to Western democratization pressure ... was often decisive.”<sup>43</sup> Of course, it is one thing to help bring down a dictator and quite another to rebuild something in its place, and this is where international community has struggled mightily, due to an absence of political will, capacity, lack of understanding of local cultures and institutions, all in the context of a general aversion to over-involvement in the region.

In terms specifically of how to counter the negative effects of “regionalization,” a number of possibilities are available to Western policymakers. They include rethinking our relationships with “strategic partners.” Chief among these is Saudi Arabia. The original strategic logic behind the partnership has repeatedly been called into question. New realities requires a shift from a strategic to transactional footing, where we move closer to them on key issues of convergence while distancing ourselves on others. If the Iranian nuclear talks – something which both of us continue to support (with some reservations) – fail, for instance, then it may

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43 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press: 2010).

provide an unexpected opening, freeing Western nations to take a stronger line on Iran, as well as the Asad regime, therefore reassuring the Saudis of the commitment to their security. But in “exchange” for this commitment, Western nations would expect the Saudis to, at least, reduce the intensity of their ongoing war on mainstream political Islam, which ultimately plays into the hands of ISIS and other extremist groups.

Here, it is worth remembering that most of the things we rely on countries like Saudi Arabia to provide, particularly in the realm of security cooperation, are things they would do regardless because it is in their self-interest.

The danger of politicizing counterterrorism is something which Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Anne Patterson alluded to in June 2014, in a rare public critique. She noted that “some people in this region conflate Islamists with terrorists and desire to eliminate the Islamists from the political scene” and that “our difficult fight against violent extremists is made more complicated by this viewpoint.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, diverting counterterrorism resources to wage political battles against political opponents is obviously problematic and calls into question our reliance on Saudi Arabia as an effective counterterrorism partner. Counterterrorism depends on being able to identify and distinguish who the terrorists are – and who they aren’t. This is just one area where the Arab Spring has highlighted fundamental differences of opinion between longtime allies on questions of democracy, inclusion and the very notion of “stability.”

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44 Remarks delivered by Anne Patterson, June 9, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2014/06/09%202014%20us%20islamic%20world%20forum/patterson%20remarks.pdf>.

## 6. Renewed Authoritarianism

Shadi Hamid

With the spreading chaos in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the idea of a “strongman” – a powerful, if even sometimes brutal, individual who could bring or impose stability – has grown more attractive among Middle Eastern populations. In Egypt, for example, the celebration of dictatorship seemed a relic of the past as the country reveled in Mubarak’s fall. Yet three years later, many Egyptians would welcome a new military leader and rejoice when he toppled a democratically elected, if flawed, government. Even in countries, like Jordan and Morocco, the pro-government media routinely points to events in neighboring countries to justify limits on freedom and democracy.

Even in countries with more successful transitions, such as Tunisia, a massive expectations gap contributed to perceptions of failing democracy. The international community found itself unable, or unwilling, to reduce the gap and shore up fragile new governments (As we have seen, external factors can, under certain conditions, play a significant and even decisive role in promoting democratic reform). On the part of both the United States and Europe, there was no fundamental re-orientation of U.S. policy, meaning that pre-Arab Spring policies remained largely intact, particularly in the Gulf countries, Jordan, and Morocco. In the transitional countries – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen – only a limited amount of new aid was pledged, despite deteriorating economies.<sup>45</sup> For the most part, the United States tried to continue “business as usual” even as it pledged to back democratic transformations across the region.

Contrary to declinist assumptions, the U.S. does, in fact, have more leverage in the Middle East than many American policymakers assume, particularly now. The threat of Iran, whole often overstated, continues to loom large, marking the coming period as a hinge moment for U.S. policy, but in a way that affirms American leverage. Instead of viewing the United States as dependent on the Gulf, the reverse is more accurate: in the face of Iranian aggression, the Gulf states have never been more dependent on U.S. security provisions, including advanced weaponry and efforts at coordinating regional missile defense, in addition to the ability to coordinate efforts to counter more subversive Iranian proxy activities. In other words, Iran may provide an opening for the United States as well as Europe to adopt a more comprehensive approach of linking what have until now been treated as discrete concerns – security and reform.

In Turkey, where I just completed a round of meetings with Turkish government officials and opposition figures,<sup>46</sup> fears of the ruling Justice and Development Party’s growing authoritarian tendencies are a common theme, especially in light of a new security bill which enhances

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45 Salman Shaikh and Shadi Hamid, “Between Interference and Assistance: The Politics of International Support in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya,” *Brookings Doha Center*, November 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/11/iwf-papers/bdcweb.pdf>.

46 Interviews with senior advisors to former president Abdullah Gul, prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and AKP figures, Istanbul and Ankara, February 15-24, 2015.

police powers and undermines due process in the name of fighting terrorism.<sup>47</sup> That what was previously one of the more promising cases of gradual democratic reform might be reversing its gains should be of greater concern to the U.S. and European nations. Here, the European Union, in particular, has been – and still can be – an important part of the story.

After coming to power in 2002, the Islamist-rooted AKP passed a series of far-reaching reforms that moved Turkey further along the democratic path. The prospect of EU membership played a crucial role in providing incentives for the AKP to pursue difficult but necessary changes, including revising the penal code, easing restrictions on freedom of expression, reining in the power of the military, and expanding rights for the Kurdish minority. Yet, after the negotiations with the EU faltered, the AKP-led government seemed to lose interest in democratization, increasingly adopting illiberal and undemocratic practices.<sup>48</sup>

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

Some may see the U.S. and European reversion to “business as usual” not as a problem but as a welcome embrace of the world as it is rather than as we wish it to be. A discussion of why democracies, in the long-term, prove more stable, more successful economically, more peaceful, and more reliable as allies is beyond the scope of this paper. But it is worth noting that the current approach of Western nations supporting and even embracing autocratic regimes was U.S. and European policy to various degrees for much of the pre-Arab Spring period. First, autocratic regimes proved unsustainable as the Arab uprisings clearly demonstrated. Governments that do not govern through consent and that exclude large portions of their populations of political deliberation are *inherently* unstable, because the excluded segments will always have an incentive to play “spoiler,” as developments in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria demonstrate. There is also a body of empirical work which, while far from conclusive, suggests some degree of causal linkage between lack of democracy and terrorism. Steven Brooke and I survey this literature in greater detail in an article we wrote in 2010.<sup>49</sup>

With all of that said, democratization is no easy fix. There is a short-term / long-term tradeoff. Democratizing countries may be more prone to instability, as Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder have persuasively argued in their work.<sup>50</sup> This is particularly the case in countries where democratic openings deepen ideological cleavages. Policymakers – if they agree with the premise that more inclusive, pluralistic governments are preferable in the long run – must be willing to accept that some short-term interests may be challenged. The focus then should not be on postponing the inevitable but rather on encouraging allies to engage in gradual reform, which is preferable to revolutionary shocks.

The question I turn to now, then, is how the international community can more effectively promote political reform. Before that, though, I will address the question of leverage, or, in

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47 Noah Blasser, “Opposition mounts over Turkey’s new security bill,” *Al Jazeera*, 28 February 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/02/opposition-mounts-turkey-security-bill-150228090655311.html>.

48 See, for example, David Lepeska, “Turkey’s long game: how 12 years of AKP rule has eroded the secular state,” *The National*, 20 November 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-lifestyle/the-review/turkeys-long-game-how-12-years-of-akp-rule-has-eroded-the-secular-state>.

49 Shadi Hamid and Steven Brooke, “Promoting Democracy to Stop Terror, Revisited,” *Policy Review*, February/March 2010, <http://www.hoover.org/research/promoting-democracy-stop-terror-revisited>.

50 Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies go to War* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).



other words, whether the international community, assuming that it wants to, is capable of supporting democratic reform in the first place.

The EU accession process is a particularly promising example of reform “conditionality.” Traditionally, discussions over aid conditionality have revolved around the negative kind, whereby powerful donor countries provide a credible threat of sanction by suspending or canceling much-needed economic assistance. Such a punitive approach can backfire, of course, considering the understandable sensitivities over outside interference. A better alternative is “positive conditionality” – providing economic and political incentives for governments to meet explicit, measurable benchmarks on democratic reform. While the lure of the EU has diminished somewhat, many in Turkey, both government and opposition, still express interest in eventual accession. Building greater support within the EU for a jumpstarted, serious accession process is as critical as ever, as Turkey enters into a delicate phase where a new constitution and new presidential system will be considered.

The EU has the ability to “embed” countries within a thick regional order. No comparable mechanism exists in the Arab world. Yet the template is relevant for understanding how the international community might bind struggling democracies within a mutually beneficial regional order. In a 2013 article in *The Washington Quarterly*, Peter Mandaville and I proposed a Multilateral Endowment for Reform (MER) which, building on the administration’s proposed MENA Incentive Fund, would anchor basic relationships with Arab allies around a new framework for incentivizing reforms. To this day, a sustained, systematic attempt at economic assistance to explicit democratic reforms has never before been attempted in the Middle East. The funding platform we proposed would start at \$5 billion with the aim of reaching \$20 billion in ten years. Its multilateral nature would be key to its success, both in terms of reducing the level of direct financial burden on the U.S. as well as avoiding perceptions that Washington hopes to engineer political outcomes. Europe would be a major partner and contributor to the Endowment. As we explained then

The MER would take its lead from recent innovations in the delivery of large-scale development assistance such as the Bush Administration’s Millennium Challenge Corporation, which established a firm linkage between governance quality – including democracy – and significant levels of economic aid. Based on reform goals agreed to jointly by the Endowment, partner governments, and civil society, the MER would disburse funds against reform commitments by partner governments. Mechanisms of accountability would be built into all partnerships, with clear and enforceable benchmarks, ongoing monitoring, and transparent criteria – not to mention the necessary political will – for suspension or termination of funding if reform commitments are not met.<sup>51</sup>

While the form of such an endowment can differ depending on the nations and mechanisms involved, the organizing principle is that one-off injections of economic aid, even when sizable, are unlikely to lead to enduring reform commitments. What are needed are institutionalized reform mechanisms that are not dependent or held hostage to particularly administrations or to overriding strategic interests.

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51 Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, “Bringing the United States Back into the Middle East,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Fall 2013, [http://csis.org/files/publication/TWQ\\_13Winter\\_Hamid-Mandaville.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/TWQ_13Winter_Hamid-Mandaville.pdf).



We do realize we are writing this in a context where democracy promotion has been further deprioritized in light of regional development, including the need to work ever more closely with authoritarian governments to counter ISIS. With this in mind, a few comments on the relationship of democratic reform to the anti-ISIS fight are in order.

President George W. Bush launched the “war on terror” in 2001 but two years later there was also a corresponding “freedom agenda,” which offered an intellectual framework – however flawed and badly implemented – for understanding the rise of political violence in the Arab world. What will be Obama (or his successor’s) freedom agenda equivalent to this new war on terror? In light of recent events, this question has assumed newfound urgency: The international community cannot defeat what is *not* primarily a terrorist organization with what amounts to a narrow counterterrorism strategy. ISIS is also a proto-state with aspirations to governance that draws on a number of failures – failed states, the failure of a regional order increasingly primarily by proxy battles, and the failure of the secular state to accommodate Islamist political participation. All of these failures must be addressed as part of any long-term strategy to defeat ISIS.

The key challenges in the Middle East today all stem – almost without exception – from an absence of effective and legitimate governance. Perhaps the most striking thing is that few officials in the U.S. or Europe would disagree with this but so little of actual policy and new policy thinking has taken on this rather basic realization. Of course, considering all the region’s crises – including those we discuss in this report – it is difficult to move beyond a crisis management posture. As it relates to the United States and to various degrees European nations, a strategic policy planning function vis-à-vis the Middle East has been almost wholly absent from foreign policy in recent years. Amidst ongoing crises and near-term concerns about violent conflict and extremism, U.S. and European governments have not been focusing on what can and needs to be done now in order to facilitate the kind of effective governance we would like to see twenty years down the line.

# Conclusion

The trends and challenges outlined in the previous sections did not occur in a vacuum; they are interconnected and share at least some of the same root causes. As we have seen, a fundamental driver of these challenges remains an absence of effective, legitimate, and inclusive governance which can offer a sense of national belonging, citizenship, and respect for human rights while also fulfilling basic needs of security, employment, and social welfare.

Yet this only highlights the evident tension between Western policymakers' short-term desire to manage and contain Middle East crises and the need for more systematic, long-term planning and strategic thinking that takes into account deeper trends and dynamics. We are reminded of the need to distinguish between "urgent" and "important" policy matters.<sup>52</sup> In this report, we have tried to focus on what we feel are the most important trends and dynamics which will shape the nature of Middle East conflict – unfortunately not just for years but likely decades to come.

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52 For a useful discussion on "urgent" versus "important" policy matters, see Michael Doran, "The Nexus and the Olive Tree," *Foreign Policy*, August 22, 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/22/the\\_nexus\\_and\\_the\\_olive\\_tree](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/22/the_nexus_and_the_olive_tree).