Transformations in West Asia: Regional Perspectives

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Editor's Note

The first edition of the West Asia Conference was held successfully in March 2014 with active support from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). The purpose of the conference was to bring together stakeholder opinions and perspectives from India and West Asia on the developments in the region and their global implications. ORF published a special report titled "Transformations in West Asia: Perspectives from Egypt, Israel, Libya, Qatar, Turkey and India" to collate the critical issues discussed during the interactions.

The conference was proposed as an annual event, and following the success of the first edition, ORF sought to broaden participation from both concerned regions to foster in-depth analysis of crucial developments in West Asia and their impact on India. The second edition, titled "Transformations in West Asia: Regional Perspectives," saw conversation on developments that followed the Arab Spring, which have created instability and political uncertainty throughout the West Asian region; fluctuations in the region's geopolitics because of the changing role of extra-regional powers; economic, political and strategic commonalities that have given rise to new avenues for cooperation between India and the region; and the growth of religious extremism and terrorism, which has emerged as another important dimension in shaping India-West Asia relations. The papers* presented in this short volume represent these conversations.

The now annual ORF-MEA West Asia Conference—*Transformations in West Asia*—is a manifestation of Track II dialogue, seen as a tool to facilitate and supplement traditional instruments of diplomacy. The crystallisation of socio-political divisions as well as shifting power structures in West Asia has elevated the significance of constructive engagement between civil societies and non-governmental actors. Track II initiatives surpass any governmental blockages that may hinder broad-based communication, instead allowing for independent insights, the identification of emerging problems and the fostering of a deeper understanding between different actors.

These efforts find strength in not only generating new perspectives, but also promoting an exchange of ideas for the way forward. Track II dialogues seek to override challenges of mistrust by creating a platform for enhancing and harmonising synergies. Given the breadth of actors, positions and circumstances being faced in West Asia, the endeavour is that this

conference becomes, over time, a critical medium bridging the gap between opinions and discourses that span geographical, political, social, religious and economic borders in the region. It is ORF's hope to explore the interconnected and interlinked values and interests of the people of both regions through a sustained commitment.

*All are conference papers

3. THE CHANGING MIDDLE EAST AND THE CRUMBLING POLITICAL ORDER: AN ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The Middle East is now entering its fifth year of tempest that began as a protest by young citizens and liberal groupings seeking to rid themselves of the oppressive regimes in their countries, with the great expectation of an "Arab Spring" of freedom and democracy. This Arab Spring, however, quickly evolved into an Arab upheaval that served to strengthen the Muslim Brotherhood and intensify disintegration of the present regional order based on recognised nation-states and international boundaries. In so doing, it has strengthened and facilitated the troubling spread of radical Islamic forces that are currently challenging the regional and world order and seeking to establish a new one.

Troubling instability in the security, political, economic and social realms marks the current reality of the Middle East. The impact of this instability is not limited to the Middle East alone but has also spilled over into the international system, forcing Western countries to contend with waves of jihadist terrorism and immigration of a scope and character that threaten the fundamental values of Western societies.

The United States has thus far been unable to formulate a relevant and effective policy of response and intervention, and its conduct in the region has raised doubts and a sense of mistrust among its allies. The weakness of the US has had an impact on the international community, which has found it difficult to reach agreement regarding mechanisms of intervention in the regions of conflict in the Middle East. The weakness of the international community and the renewed rivalry between the US and Russia have facilitated and intensified escalation and deterioration, accelerating the weakening of nation-states and increasing fragmentation. This, in turn, has served to strengthen Islamic jihadist forces and deepen the intervention of external actors, with an emphasis on Iran as the force leading the radical axis in the arenas of conflict.

The Middle East is also becoming a region of renewed rivalry between the US and Russia. Considerable tensions between the two powers and disagreements over issues and other disputed regions, such as Ukraine, have motivated Russia to develop a competing agenda that is oppositional to the American agenda in the Middle East. In some sense, we are bearing witness to a new incarnation of the Cold War in the Middle East. This has made it even more difficult for the international community to achieve agreement on the means of intervention in areas of conflict, instead transforming said conflicts into elements that further fuel and fan the flames of rivalry between the superpowers into an escalating force of regional instability.

The more than four-year-long upheaval in the Arab world and the absence of a horizon for stabilisation and achievement of political agreement between rival camps are indicative of the weakness of civil society in Arab countries. The period of upheaval has effectively only added to this weakness. In the absence of a strong and developed civil society, it appears that Arab societies in the crumbling countries will find it difficult to institute processes to rebuild functioning states. The region will continue to suffer from chronic instability, which will also be exported to the international system.

Prominent Attributes of the Regional Reality that Have Emerged in the Shadow of the Arab Upheaval

The emerging regional reality is characterised by the following ten major attributes:

Disintegration of the Political Order

Arab nation-states, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq, were ruled for decades by authoritarian leaders. During this time, these rulers succeeded in maintaining state stability through: a) State institutions, armies, and security and intelligence apparatuses, ensuring survival of the regime through oppression of the civilian population; b) the exclusion of groups, tribes and sects (such as the Houthis in Yemen, the Sunnis and the Kurds in Syria, the Sunnis in Iraq and certain Bedouin tribes in Libya); and c) the management of the country's domestic and foreign affairs. This involved the suppression of subversive forces, including jihadist terror organisations that posed a threat to the regime. State leaders took care to nurture the legitimacy of their rule and the illegitimacy of subversive forces using national identity, which they also attempted to cultivate despite shaky historical, ethnic, religious or cultural foundations.

The political order that for decades had existed as an oppressive national fiction crumbled in a regional domino effect that began in Tunisia at the beginning of 2011. In the absence of a functional infrastructure and tradition, and a commitment to society and state as opposed to

merely 'leader' and 'regime,' these states crumbled, and the alternative regimes set up in their stead were unable to establish sufficiently broad legitimacy for their existence.

Peripheral Regions as Frontiers

The nation-state that had functioned as distinct territorial units with state mechanisms of control and consolidation ceased to exist as such. The central government in these countries lost control of peripheral regions and focused their efforts and resources on ensuring survival in the areas surrounding the capitals and large cities. Peripheral regions have thus become frontier regions, attracting jihadi terrorist groups that have based their organisations and activities in these uncontrolled areas. Deadly mass terrorist operations have been exported to large urban centres in crumbling states and into the region, and are undermining stability and security in both the states that were disintegrating in any event—further accelerating the process—in the broader arena.

The Spread of ISIS and Radical Jihad

The civil war that developed in Syria and the fragility of Iraq has resulted in the spread of ISIS in northwest Iraq and northeast Syria, its establishment throughout a broad territory, its control over the population in this territory, and the mass murder—in some cases, on par with genocide—of all non-Sunnis and all Sunnis ISIS leadership classifies as infidels. The violent and bloody seizure of conquered territory has been accompanied by the sophisticated use of a media strategy, based on extensive use of social networks. ISIS also continues to instil terror in the civilian population and cultivate a widely held sense of accomplishment in the remaining areas of the countries (Syria and Iraq), in the region as a whole and in the international community.

Network Jihad in the Making

ISIS's successes have attracted other jihadi groups in the region to join its ranks in an effort to bring about an Islamic revolution they expect will be followed by the establishment of the Islamic State. This process is reflective of a new phenomenon of "network jihad": Jihadist terrorist groups in the Middle East are accepting the authority of ISIS as a parent organisation, mobilising themselves to achieve its goals, operating in its name, and swearing allegiance to the group's leader and self-defined Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This network terrorism has expanded the scope of jihadist murder and helped challenge the existing state and regional order.

It has also accelerated the obfuscation of borders and further intensified the sense of accomplishment in the populations throughout the region. This latter is also true for many

young people in Western countries, whether Muslims or Muslim converts, or simply anarchists or nihilists, who are in search of a path and purpose in their lives and want to extricate themselves from the state of alienation in which they live.

Egypt as an Exception

The tempestuous winds that swept across the Middle East even succeeded in destabilising Egypt, the historic, symbolic and undisputed leader of the Arab world. However, as a result of its governmental tradition, its distinct Egyptian identity, and the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to be an effective alternative to the military national leadership despite winning elections, the state system was able to regain its composure and stabilise itself, despite the extremely complex challenges it continues to face.

Iran, its Hegemonic Aspirations and Proxies

The Arab upheaval in Syria marked a turning point from a regional perspective, as the danger posed to Assad's regime also emerged as a threat to the vital strategic interests of Iran. Tehran regards the Alawite regime in Syria as a representative and base of support for the radical Shiite camp it is leading in an attempt to establish regional hegemony. In this context, Iran could not remain on the sidelines; in order to ensure its vital interests in the region, it has mobilised itself completely, openly and in a declared manner to come to the assistance of the Syrian regime. To this end, Iran has also mobilised Hezbollah, its protégé and proxy and Syria's ally. As a result, the very present and future existence of the Syrian Alawite regime now depends on the grace of Iranian and Hezbollah support, and the goodwill of Russia with regard to the provision of arms and support in the international community, particularly in terms of preventing all American and European attempts at humanitarian intervention involving the use of military force against the regime.

The Sunni-Shiite Split in the Arab World

The involvement of Iran and Hezbollah in regional conflicts has not stopped in Syria. Both have also maintained an active presence in Iraq, and active Iranian involvement has also reached Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. In actuality, the Arab upheaval has become a tool and a justification used by the Iranians to expand Shiite spheres of influence. Iranian involvement has served to escalate and broaden the Sunni-Shiite split in the Arab world.

Indeed, it now appears that the cards have been reshuffled and that these divisions now crisscross one another, with state-based divisions traversing lines of Shiite-Sunni division and vice-versa. Iran's growing involvement has increased the fear of the Sunni regimes in the

region, including Turkey, and has led Saudi Arabia to establish an Arab coalition to intervene militarily in Yemen against Houthi rebels, who enjoy Iranian backing and military aid. The religious split has become a political and military rivalry between Saudi Arabia, as the leader of the Sunni Arab world, and Iran, as the leader of the Shiite Muslim world.

The Irrelevance of American Strategy

In the course of the Arab upheaval, the irrelevance of the American strategy has become particularly conspicuous. During this period—at least in the eyes of US allies in the Middle East (Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel)–the US has appeared incapable of understanding the essence of the challenges, the nature of the actors and the emerging context. According to its critics, the US has been backing the wrong forces (for example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Qatar and Turkey with regard to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip), has refrained from intervening in places where it should have intervened (such as Libya, and particularly Syria), and has resigned itself to the whims of its Turkish ally, which has refused to cooperate with the Americans and has operated in ways that have worked against American interests. The US policy, led by President Obama, has been perceived as a manifestation of American weakness and has enforced a problematic US credibility with regard to the depth of its commitment to its allies.

This weakness has intensified particularly in light of the US position on the Iranian nuclear programme.

Russian Participation

In the above context, Russia has attempted to fill the vacuum left by the US, and has viewed the situation as a strategic opportunity to expand its influence in the region, all the while challenging the US as well as making use of levers of influence with the potential to advance Russian interests in other arenas.

An expanding Turkish role

ISIS's area of operation borders on Turkey and has had a direct impact on Turkey's strategic interests in the region. Turkey regards itself as a regional power in competition with Iran and fears a split within the country as a result of stronger Kurdish national sentiment. Iraq's Kurdish autonomy, and the apparent joining of forces of the Iraqi Kurds and their Kurdish brethren in Syria, has raised levels of Turkish anxiety and restlessness.

Turkey is concerned by the prospect of a stronger Iran but, at the same time, is making efforts to avoid measures that will constitute an excessive challenge to ISIS out of fear of sparking an ISIS response against Turkey.

Turkish interests, alongside the hegemonic aspirations of its charismatic leader President Erdogan, are leading Turkey to implement an independent policy which, in many cases, is disconnected from the policy of NATO and that of the US. Turkey has been cooperating with NATO in an extremely limited capacity and in some cases has refrained from cooperation altogether, despite being a NATO member. Such Turkish conduct, in the absence of a determined American response, has weakened the status of the US in the region, and has transformed Turkey into an even more significant actor attempting to expand its influence in a number of other arenas as well, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (with an emphasis on the Gaza Strip). Turkey has not bothered to conceal its support of Hamas, a daughter movement of the Muslim Brotherhood, which constitutes a challenge to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who view the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas as a serious threat.

The upheaval that is currently gripping the Arab world is resulting in some of the most serious humanitarian crises that the region has known in recent decades. This is particularly so because of the large populations that have been uprooted and the migratory processes that have become prevalent both within the region and from the region outward. This migration is economically, socially and politically significant. It has become a destabilising influence in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, a serious humanitarian problem in Syria, and an intensifying source of trouble for Muslim communities in the Western countries seeing an influx of refugees.

The regional reality that has emerged from these years of Arab upheaval, in light of the trends described above, has resulted in the emergence of five axes or camps:

1. A radical axis led by Iran;

2. A jihadist axis led by ISIS;

3. A monarchical Sunni axis led by Saudi Arabia;

4. A Sunni Muslim axis inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood and led by Turkey; and

5. A nationalist axis led by Egypt

Some of these camps engage in cooperative efforts and maintain alliances with one another (as in the case of the Egyptian and Saudi axes), while tension, hostility and violent conflict characterise others. The increasing number of actors, trends and conflicting interests involved in the current reality of mounting instability has pushed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the sidelines with regard to the actors' true interests (as opposed to their obligatory declarative statements). This has raised frustrations and disappointment in the Palestinian camp, which

is currently attempting to change this reality and extricate itself from the situation through internationalising the conflict. Internationalisation efforts have taken the form of a unilateral Palestinian strategy aimed at petitioning the involvement of international institutions in the conflict to increase the delegitimisation of Israel and force it into a corner. It is doubtful whether these Palestinian efforts will indeed serve to improve its reality and strategic chances. It is also difficult to imagine a situation in which an independent Palestinian state could be established without an agreement with Israel. Indeed, the current Palestinian efforts to tarnish and delegitimise Israel may serve only to reduce the chances of returning to the negotiating table and moving forward on the political process.

The Essence of the Evolving Challenge

The evolving regional reality is characterised by two main complementary and mutually reinforcing trends: the disintegration of the nation-states and expansion of the failing states phenomenon on the one hand, and the intensification of jihadist terrorism on the other. Jihadist terrorism has unique attributes that make it a cultural and intellectual challenge of significant influence. Its most prominent distinctive characteristics are its global, transnational and murderous nature, and the fact that it is network-based, has access to the weaponry of state armies and possesses significant media capabilities (with an emphasis on social networks).

Contending with the phenomenon of failing states and jihadist terrorism is no simple matter. It encompasses complicated strategic challenges requiring complex processes of learning, cooperation between different actors, determination, financial resources and leadership. Moreover, efforts must be made simultaneously. We cannot assume that these challenges can be dealt with in a systemic manner. Doing so necessitates alternatives to the existing paradigms, which have been found to be irrelevant. The formulation of alternative paradigms requires attending to a number of important questions:

1. Is it correct to think in terms of state-based order in all places? Has the time come for reorganising the area/region on ethnic grounds, or perhaps to think in terms of weakened federations?

2. How can we establish an alternative system of alliances and cooperation?

3. How can we reduce the chances of the production of failing states?

4. How can we reduce Iranian influence in the various arenas of conflict?

Without a doubt, the list of questions that must be considered is never-ending, and the efforts and investments required to deal with this complex and ongoing process are great and intertwined. Most importantly, we may also have to get used to the idea that not all human problems are necessarily solvable; some may be situations we need to learn to live with and to manage more effectively using a strategy of damage control.