Regional Transformation in the Middle East 2015

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The three most noteworthy regional developments in 2015 were the formulation of the nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1, the Saudi military intervention in the Yemeni civil war, and the Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war. Whatever its implications for Iran's nuclear program and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, the nuclear deal also heightened concerns about Iran's capacity to pursue a hegemonial agenda in the region. Like the Saudi intervention in Yemen, the Iranian nuclear deal must therefore also be viewed through the prism of an intensifying competition between regional powers – based on identity no less than on geopolitical interests – for preeminence in what seems like a region made increasingly chaotic by the weakening of central authority in various states and, as a result, the multiplication of local actors in regional alignments and balances. The third development, Russia's direct involvement in the combat in Syria, served as a dramatic reminder that the competition among outside great powers for influence and presence in the Middle East, which defined the region's geostrategic role in world politics for most of the twentieth century but was thought to have dissipated following the end of the Cold War, has returned with a vengeance.

None of these developments impinged directly on Israel's near term security agenda; all of them had potentially significant longer term ramifications.

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Symptomatic of a growing regional disorder marked by the proliferation of actors unwilling or unable to carry out rational security dialogues, these developments highlighted the risks of escalation, intended or otherwise, in the context of shifting alliances, rising and falling powers, and strategic ambiguities. Steps to mitigate these risks are not inconceivable, but by late 2015, conditions needed to facilitate those steps seemed improbable and were not, in any case, entirely under Israel's control.

Growing Regional Disorder

The turmoil in the Arab world that erupted in late 2010 in Tunisia and was initially labeled the "Arab Spring" began as a series of domestic upheavals and crises. The regional dimension of these upheavals was mostly evident in the "demonstration effect," that is, the inspiration that anti-regime demonstrations and rebellions in one state gave to disaffected publics in other Arab states. As a result, the Arab Spring, like a kind of contagion, spread from Tunisia to Egypt and from there to Libya and Yemen. However, internal crises and the weakening of authority in certain Arab states quickly provided fertile ground for the eruption of struggles for power among various forces – some of them states and some of them ideological movements. These struggles took on a mixed character. In one sense, they constituted classic contests among regional powers competing for power and influence. At the same time, however, they were confrontations between different ideological worldviews, and even identities. This second element of the "Great Game" has become more prominent in the last two years; it fuels and exacerbates violent conflicts between local actors in various theaters throughout the region and sometimes also results in the subordination of some actors' material interests and considerations while benefiting those of other regional actors.

This change has coincided with the growing military involvement of global actors, largely in response to the threat presented by the Islamic State (or ISIS).Thus, by the end of 2015 in Syria, Iranian and Iranian-proxy forces (Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias) maintained an ongoing presence on the ground in support of the Assad regime; Turkish ground forces and air forces intervened intermittently, ostensibly as part of the anti-ISIS coalition but more often to support Turkmens or harass Kurds; and American, French, British, Jordanian, Russian, and Israeli air forces all operated in Syrian air

space, the first four against ISIS, the Russians against any forces opposed to Assad (of which ISIS was not the most proximate or immediate), and Israel in order to interdict weapons transfers to Hezbollah and, occasionally, to attack sources of fire at Israeli territory – usually government forces.

Apart from Israel, all of these outside actors have some potential influence over their allies or protégés, and agreement among them could potentially enhance the chances of an imposed ceasefire or even political agreement – but only if the outside actors raise a credible threat to coerce their own "side" to make decisive concessions. Despite recurrent rumors of some convergence of views among the outside forces around a power sharing formula involving a transitional role for Assad and a more permanent role for those he ostensibly represents, by year's end there was little concrete evidence of any willingness of outsiders to reconcile their own contradictory interests. Thus, the confluence of escalating indirect and direct involvement by regional actors and the introduction of extra-regional military forces (albeit largely limited to air forces, except for the Iranian-led coalition) has intensified the chaos in the region, enhanced the risks of confrontation and escalation, and rendered domestic conflicts even less amenable to some kind of political resolution.

Regional Axes

In terms of regional alignments, there are four main local actors. The first, and most coherent, is the "axis of resistance" led by Iran. There are three dimensions to this axis: the political, that is, the ambition of the Iranian state to become a leading regional actor with dominant influence throughout the region; the sectarian, that is, the sense of Iran as the central Shiite force protecting and advancing the interest of Shiites and their allies; and the ideological, that is, the mission of "resistance" to Western influence and presence, especially that of the United States (the "Great Satan") and its ally, Israel (the "Little Satan").

The second grouping is the axis of pragmatic Sunni states led by Saudi Arabia. This axis also has three dimensions: the Saudi state struggle with Iran for regional leadership, especially in the sub-region of the Gulf; the historical confrontation between Shiites and Sunni Islam, which in Saudi Arabia takes an extreme Wahhabi-Salafi form; and the practical dimension

of Gulf states' security alliances with the West, especially the United States, even as Iran remains determined to eliminate or at least reduce the Western presence in the Gulf.

The third actor is the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement that emerged in Egypt in the 1930s but has since developed into a major region-wide Islamist force with important connections and influence in Qatar and Turkey. Finally, there are the Salafi jihadist movements operating throughout the Arab space and in the Muslim world as a whole. The most prominent of these in recent years have been al-Qaeda and its even more virulent offshoot, the Islamic State.

Complicating the picture further is the fact that with the exception of the "axis of resistance," these actors are tacit and loose alignments rather than highly cohesive and disciplined entities, and the relations among them are in a constant state of flux. In recent years, they have fought among themselves and with each other, often using local agents, and in 2015 their struggles reached new levels of intensity. In the Salafi jihadist camp, for example, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have stepped up their verbal hostilities in a contest that is cloaked in tactical arguments but in fact is about primacy within their common constituency and targeted support base. Moreover, while the Muslim Brotherhood camp (Turkey and Qatar) and the "pragmatic" Saudi-led Sunni camp are both opposed to Iranian influence and committed to the anti-Assad forces in Syria, they have squabbled over developments in Egypt, with the former supporting the Muslim Brotherhood government that briefly held power following the departure of Husni Mubarak and the latter endorsing (and underwriting) the ouster of President Mohammad Morsi and the subsequent repression of the Islamists by a military coup led by General Abd al-Fattah el-Sisi. Against this background, it is striking that Egypt under Sisi, though a "natural" partner in the pragmatic Sunni alignment, takes a rather more ambivalent approach than do the others to the Syrian civil war and implies, in contrast to Saudi and UAE insistence (as well as that of Turkey and Qatar), that while the Assad regime must eventually be removed, there may be some continuing role for Assad to play in a transition. Perhaps this seeming inconsistency is explained by the fact that Egypt itself is targeted in Sinai and inside Egypt proper by Salafi jihadist elements, including offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, some

of which have declared their allegiance to Assad's strongest adversary, the Islamic State, and announced the creation of its Egyptian extension, Wilayat Sinai (the Sinai Governorate).

Conflicts Within, Conflicts Between

Such inconsistencies and contradictions make it impossible to reduce all the murderous conflicts and instabilities of the region to variations on a simple Iranian-Saudi/Sunni-Shiite dichotomy. Indeed, in some local arenas, that dichotomy hardly comes into play at all. In Libya, for example, a three-way civil war involving pragmatic secularists supported by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates; elements of the Muslim Brotherhood; and jihadi actors identified with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (in addition to various tribal factions and local gang leaders) has persisted since the fall of Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011. But since none of these factions is allied with Iran, and the Shiite population in Libya is negligible, the Libyan reverberations of the Arab Spring continue to unfold without reference to the major fault line in Middle Eastern socio-politics.

That, however, is not the case, elsewhere in the region. Syria is arguably the preeminent stage on which the conflict among the four alignments plays out. Iran and its non-state proxies/protégés (Hezbollah and Iraqi and Afghan Shiite militias) continue to shore up Assad with funding, weapons, training, advice in the formation and activation of militias, and – most critically – direct involvement in combat. On the other side, the pragmatic Saudi-led Sunni axis and affiliates/supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood (Turkey and Qatar) are effectively allies in the struggle to remove the Assad regime, supporting both secular and "moderate" (i.e., Muslim Brotherhood) rebels, and even certain jihadi elements opposed to the Islamic State. Meanwhile, the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (which defines itself as the Syrian arm of al-Qaeda) fight the others and one another. They enjoy no direct assistance from any state, but benefit from the support of elements within various regional states and volunteers from the entire Muslim world.

Graphic and highly publicized IS depredations in the Middle East and terrorist attacks against non-Middle East targets in the region and beyond have resulted in growing international military activity ostensibly aimed at the Islamic State (though in practice that is not always the case) – first by the

United States and Turkey, then Russia, then France, and, at the very end of the year, Britain. Together with the refugee crisis threatening to overwhelm European response capacities in 2015, the formation of an international anti-Islamic State coalition caused most foreign attention to be focused on Syria. But that did not mean that other ongoing conflicts, also framed by the Iranian-Saudi/Shiite-Sunni fault line, were necessarily less salient.

On the contrary, regional involvement in the Yemeni domestic conflict escalated when Shiite Houthis broke out of their northern redoubt and tried to take control of the entire country. The ouster of long-time President Ali Abdullah Saleh in the Yemeni chapter of the Arab Spring had not produced a sustainable political order or introduced the kind of stability lacking even before the popular challenge to Saleh. The results of the election in 2012 were forcibly challenged in 2014 when Houthi rebels in the north, reportedly cooperating with army officers still loyal to Saleh, moved into the capital, San'a, and then in early 2015 advanced south to threaten Aden, where elected President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi had taken refuge before decamping to Saudi Arabia. Although there is no evidence that Iran had explicitly pushed the Houthis to launch their 2014 offensive, their Shiite identity and links with Iran prompted the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs to view this development as part of a larger Iranian campaign of encirclement, and they responded in March with a large scale air offensive and limited ground operations, which inflicted widespread damage and extensive civilian casualties.

Operation Decisive Storm successfully checked the Houthis and pushed them back – and the inability of Iran to prevent that exposed serious limitations of its power – but it did not produce a conclusive victory. As the fighting persisted through 2015, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula took advantage of regional and international actors' preoccupation with the war against the Houthis in the west of the country to expand its presence in the center and east, where the Islamic State also began to show signs of activity. What this means is that both Iran and Saudi Arabia were pulled into a local conflict by local proxies or allies and forced by their all-encompassing bipolar framing of regional developments to commit to courses of actions that precluded cooperation in addressing issues of common concern. In short, Yemen provides more evidence of the inconsistencies and contradictions

of regional change, though without any clear dynamic, direction, or sense of emerging new order.

Of course, not all regional actors were drawn into the quasi-system of alignments and alliances. One major example was Israel; another was the Kurds, who have every reason to maximize their own power but lack any identity markers or ideological beliefs that might incline them to align with any of the regional axes. Kurdish policies and behavior strongly reflect the contradictions of transformation without a clear sense of direction. On the one hand, the Kurds have shifted from being an object of Middle East politics to becoming a political subject in their own right. That process began with the weakening of central Iraqi state authority in the 1991 Gulf War, accelerated after the 2003 war, and was given further impetus by the disintegration of the familiar state framework in Iraq and Syria. Those developments, along with the perception that the Kurds are the most reliable and effective force fighting the Islamic State, seem to imply the arrival of the "Kurdish moment," that is, a concatenation of circumstances that will allow the Kurds to achieve their long-desired independence, at least in northern Iraq. Even in northern Syria, the Kurds have been able to strengthen their position and, with American air support, inflict some striking defeats on Islamic State forces in Kobani and Tel Abyad (as well as in Sinjar, in Iraq). In July, they consolidated three separate enclaves between Qamishli and Kobani in which they had already declared autonomy. An even more promising scenario from their perspective would be the unification of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq with the autonomous enclaves in northern Syria. The emergence of an independent Kurdish state would be the most dramatic manifestation of the geographical collapse of the Sykes-Picot agreement declared by the Islamic State in 2014 (when it took down indicators of a border between Iraq and Syria) and would, more than anything else, underscore the political transformation of the region.

Still, transformation has not yet been extensive enough to eliminate all constraints on Kurdish freedom of maneuver. Some regional forces that traditionally contained Kurdish ambitions continue to do so, among them, the Turks and the Iranians. Turkey renewed its offensive against the PKK, the Kurdish underground in Turkey and in northern Iraq, following the collapse of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process in July 2015. Iranians, due to their

central role in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq, have increased their influence there, including in the Kurdish Regional Government's areas of jurisdiction, and like the Turks, are apprehensive that more forceful assertions of Kurdish aspirations for independence in Iraq or Syria could reverberate in Kurdish-populated parts of their own country. Furthermore, growing Western sympathy for the Kurds did not always translate into material support; many Kurds interpreted Western indifference to Turkish attacks on the Kurdish positions in northern Iraq as a quid pro quo for permission to use airbases in Turkey to attack the Islamic State, that is, as yet another instance of Western betrayal of the Kurds. The Islamic State threat also prompted the KRG to abandon, at least temporarily, its intention to hold a referendum on independence, perhaps because Islamic State offensives or Islamic State control in northern Iraq had led so many non-Kurds to flee to Kurdistan, changing the demographic character of that area. Finally, endemic disunity among Kurds undermined their ability to act as a coherent entity in regional and international politics. In short, regional transformation had gone far enough to enable the Kurds to assume a more autonomous role than in the past, but not far enough to take on the role of a legitimate, full-fledged state participant in the evolving regional system.

Israeli Security and the Prospects for Regional Cooperation

Events in 2015 generally tended to reinforce the sense that the region as a whole was on a course of growing disorder, violence, and insecurity. Slowing or halting that trend or even reversing its direction was not inconceivable, but it would require at least one of two major policy shifts among leading Middle East actors, if not both. The first would be some kind of détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia (on behalf of its GCC partners). Given the centrality of this political-ideological-geostrategic rift to much of regional dynamics, any moderation of the tensions between them would imply the strong possibility of reduced tensions in a number of regional conflict arenas. In fact, despite their contradictory positions on almost every issue, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have previously exhibited enough pragmatism to permit some coordination when circumstances require it. Indeed, there were some signs of a thaw, however instrumental, in relations between Iran and some of the Gulf states following the election of Hassan Rouhani

as President in 2013 and the elaboration of two nuclear agreements – the interim agreement in 2013 and the JCPOA in 2015. These took the form of conciliatory statements by senior leaders on both sides of the Gulf, reciprocal high level visits and meetings, and the signing of agreements on a number of issues – all suggesting that the two sides had turned a page on the chronicle of their mutually suspicious relations. Any further deepening of the process of reconciliation would have a positive impact on the situation in Syria by enhancing the prospects for some kind of agreed transitional and/or power-sharing arrangement that could halt the bloodshed and ongoing destruction of Syria. It would also ameliorate conditions in Iraq, where Saudi Arabia and Iran already quietly coordinated the ouster in 2014 of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the election of the more conciliatory Haidar al-Abadi as his successor. And in both Syria and Iraq, Saudi-Iranian coordination could upgrade the campaign against the Islamic State, which is perceived as a threat by both protagonists. Finally, such coordination could help contain and resolve the crisis in Yemen and promote understandings about a more stable political order in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, despite the undoubted potential benefits to both sides and to the region as a whole of détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two sides continue to operate on the basis of mutual suspicion and hostility, and the road to an historical conciliation between them seems as long as ever. Unable to overcome their weighty confessional-ideological differences, contradictory interests, and historical animosity, they seem to be bent on a course of protracted hostility. Iran may want to improve ties with the Gulf states as an element of a broader move to end its international isolation, and the Gulf states may be persuaded that some accommodation of an undeniable rising regional power to the east in conditions of American retrenchment is advisable. But it is doubtful whether the need for tactical coordination will be enough to overcome the heavy burden of history and truly change the underlying dynamics of regional politics. In any event, this kind of shift is one in which Israel can play no real role.

There is a different kind of shift that could conceivably be advanced by Israeli actions, though even in this respect Israel's transformative potential is limited. The reference here is to regional security consultation/coordination. The current state of disorder in the Middle East has created a new set of

complex and cross-cutting state and sub-state interests. Most notably, it has exacerbated the tensions and disputes between pragmatic Sunni Arab states and Iran and its proxies, as well as between these states and Salafi jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS. Some of these states also feel more threatened, due to internal tensions.

Like the Kurds, Israel has no natural affinity with any of the alignments in regional politics. Indeed, it shares even fewer identity markers with any other Middle East actor. The Kurds, at least, are Sunni Muslims. Israel's Jewish character and vocation means that it stands completely alone in terms of religion, language, ethnic identity, and cultural tradition. At the same time, Israel is a notable political-military force in the region, and coincident geo-strategic interests have in the past permitted certain kinds of unpublicized security dialogue (exchanges of intelligence and assessments) and operational cooperation, particularly between it and the so-called "peripheral" states (those on the periphery of the Arab core of the region) and non-Arab and/or non-Muslim sub-state actors like the Kurds and Lebanese Christians, but also with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and with Egypt.

For the most part, the substantive content of this kind of dialogue as well as the degree to which it was explicitly acknowledged was highly constrained, especially with respect to Arab states, because of widespread Arab identification with the Palestinians and popular hostility to Israel. Five years of Arab Spring upheavals and intensified Iranian-Saudi/Shiite-Sunni animosity have produced a clearer common Israeli and Sunni-Arab interest in containing the Iranian-led Shiite axis, and the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran may have heightened even more concerns about Iran's enhanced potential to become a hegemonic power. The degree of that concern is evident, not just in the Saudi response to events in Yemen – an uncharacteristically large scale and protracted military operation not coordinated in advance with the United States – but also in the alacrity with which other Gulf states (and Sunni Arab states further afield) rushed to provide material contributions to the military campaign or at least unqualified political/diplomatic support.

According to some observers, the extent of anxiety about Iran may mitigate some of the traditional Arab resistance to overt security dialogue with Israel. That analysis is seemingly buttressed by events such as public meetings by Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal with Israeli personalities and interviews with

Israeli media, as well as the United Arab Emirates' agreement to permit the accreditation of an Israeli diplomatic mission to the International Renewable Energy Agency, based in Abu Dhabi.

While such developments suggest that there might well be more receptivity than in the past to coordination/cooperation with Israel on an ad hoc basis, this does not yet portend Arab endorsement of a formal, institutionalized comprehensive regional security mechanism in which Israel is seen as a legitimate partner, or any abandonment of the historic Arab rejection of "normalization" with Israel in the absence of some significant movement on the Palestinian issue – precisely the kind of change that made it possible for Jordan to "come out of the closet" following the 1993 Camp David Agreement and convert its de facto convergence of interests with Israel into a formal peace treaty.

Of course, "like-minded states," including Israel, can expand the scope of their dialogue. Events of recent years have already encouraged them to do that, and different Israeli policies on the Palestinian issue, even if only declaratory, might accelerate the willingness on the part of Sunni Arab states predisposed in that direction to move even further. But for the parties to move beyond instrumental cooperation below the horizon toward the much more ambitious arms control and regional security structures of the type prematurely envisaged in the 1990s, there would need to be a truly momentous breakthrough on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. By itself, Israel can bring that about only through the kind of far reaching unilateral measures that few realistically expect it to take. Otherwise, an historic breakthrough in Arab-Israel relations still depends on a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian agreement. In other words, notwithstanding all the upheavals and realignments in the region since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the Palestinians continue to cast a long shadow over the web of Israel's political and security relations with the rest of the Middle East. That, at least, has not been transformed.

Israel and the Leading International Actors

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