

The New “State Order” in the Middle East

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It is five years since the Middle East was enveloped by revolutions that were over-optimistically called the “Arab Spring,” and a stable political order has not yet emerged in the region. Notwithstanding the domino effect that characterized the initial events, in retrospect, each arena and set of circumstances was defined by its own characteristics. More than a single common fate, the regional developments have so far generated different political models that exist concurrently in the respective Arab states. There are collapsing states (Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq); “functional states” coping with instability and immediate challenges that have so far maintained their state framework (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt, and to a lesser extent, Lebanon); and a new model, that of the Islamic State, which, through its challenge to the nation state and accepted international standards, presents an innovative attempt to realize the idea of the Sunni religious caliphate.

The common tendency to eulogize the modern borders of the Middle East designed in the framework of the imperialist agreements following WWI is not justified as an overall basic assumption. The functional states will presumably continue to maintain their state frameworks in the coming years (even if a change of regime in those states occurs). Most of the countries, except in the Fertile Crescent, are the political outgrowth of territories that have existed for hundreds of years, sometimes under the rule of dynasties that ruled for long periods and had an interest in preserving the territorial division. If stability is maintained, it is not necessarily the result of effective

regime performance, improvement in the political and socioeconomic situation, or a receding of ethnic, religious, and social tension in states. It is, rather, the result of an ebb – even if temporary – in the revolutionary spirit, and even more so, concern about the specter of chaos, violence, and bloodshed facing the population in the collapsed states.

Five years of bloody internal struggles – wrapped in extremist ideas and accompanied by violence on the part of Salafi jihadist groups in the collapsing states – are largely undermining the viability of the idea of the nation-state. The weakening of national identity has gradually exposed the ostensibly subordinated pattern of people's primordial identities based on religious, ethnic, and tribal identities. These identities are resurging as the parameters of an alternative order to the state structure in various regions of the Middle East, and it appears that the state borders and frameworks in part of the Middle East will not revert to what they formerly were. The processes of fragmentation in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen may mature into a new and more stable political order encompassing the religious and ethnic identities of the residents of the region. In this context, three political models likely to be formed as a response to the geopolitical challenges in the collapsing states can be identified.

Dissolution, Violence, and Chaos

The first scenario assumes that the existing situation will continue, and most likely will worsen. Focuses of instability in the region will aggravate the existing processes of disintegration and chaos and will prompt more extreme violence, which will cohere as a new “order” in the Middle East. The situation in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen will continue to deteriorate, and the ability of the central governments to consolidate authority and order will decline. The elements that will continue to feed the chaotic situation are violent conflicts in four spheres: (a) between Shiites and Sunnis under the influence of the struggle for regional hegemony between Iran and Saudi Arabia; (b) within the Sunni camp between the various groupings, especially the battle against radical Islam and Salafi jihadist terrorist organizations; (c) within Arab society: the same young people who began the Arab Spring and whose path to self-realization and fulfillment has been blocked might try to break through the barriers; (d) ethnic minorities such as the Kurds

will demand self-determination and independence. All these factors will lead to the strengthening of armed militias, which will expand and become more common in the absence of any internal or external centralizing power able to stabilize these arenas. Unless a change occurs, the likelihood of a pessimistic scenario materializing will increase in a way liable to cause the violence to spread and to destabilize countries that have hitherto been relatively successful in maintaining a state framework.

From a Collapsed State to a Divided State: The Federation Model

This scenario assumes a process of countries being divided into sub-units or autonomous regions (according to ethnic or tribal divisions). It is possible that the sub-units will be managed under a federal administration. These sub-units (cantons) will enjoy a degree of autonomy in internal matters. The federal model in the Middle East is likely to bridge the desire of the Arab countries and the international community to preserve the state's territorial integrity and the desire of ethnic groups to maintain their cultural independence and political autonomy.

For example, the model of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq could expand and evolve into a federal state structure in which autonomy would be granted to additional regions in Iraq according to an ethnic division (Shiites and Sunni), all linked to a central administration. This federal structure is also likely to constitute a model in other theaters, such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, and possibly other states in the area with ethnic or religious minorities in distinctive geographic regions.

The federal structure is not foreign to the Middle East. To a great extent it is reminiscent of the millet system that prevailed during the period of the Ottoman Empire – a religious community whose members conducted themselves according to the laws of the community on condition that these did not clash with the laws of the country. In exchange, the population benefits from freedom of religion and cultural autonomy. Although the federal structure was not successful in the Middle East in the past,¹ it is possible that long years of dissolution and violence could lead certain theaters to reconsider this model.

“Disintegration and Assembly”: From a Single Large State to Small Independent States

States finding it difficult to maintain any state framework at all, or to generate agreement on a central administration, are likely to decide on dissolution and division of their territory into several separate and independent entities along ethnic and religious lines (so that Sunnis will not rule Shiites, and vice versa). This idea is not new in the Middle East. A similar case can be seen in Yemen, which before its 1990 union had two autonomous units: North Yemen (independent since 1918) and South Yemen (since 1967). Some assert that the situation in South Yemen and North Yemen was better before the union, in comparison with the current state of “united” Yemen.

Fulfillment of the Kurdish vision of establishing an independent state (separate from the Iraqi administration) is a possible example of a political settlement of this type. Indeed, the development of Kurdish autonomy into an independent entity is not an unreasonable scenario, but this too is encountering difficulties and opposition within Iraq and from its neighbors having a Kurdish community (Turkey, Syria, and Iran), which will therefore attempt to block this scenario. In the future, Syria and Lebanon could also find themselves divided into independent state entities along ethnic lines. In Syria, for example, one proposed model was already applied during the French Mandate period, with Alawite autonomy in the coastal strip in the west, Druze autonomy in Jabel Druze north of Jordan, Sunni autonomy in central Syria, and Kurdish autonomy in the north.

While the first scenario – continuation and acceleration of the existing trend – currently appears very likely, it appears that the conditions are not yet ready for progress in the other two models as an option for stabilizing the situation and relieving some of the distress and rivalries in the region. Development in stages is also possible – first dissolution into homogeneous ethnic frameworks, and in the second stage, their unification into a federal or confederative framework. At this stage, the international community believes that it is possible to turn the clock back to the state framework that prevailed in the region for nearly 100 years. In the long term, the other models can emerge from either official approval from a state’s central government, or mainly through the creation of facts on the ground that will win local or international recognition. In any case, history shows that

it would be preferable for the initiative for a new political order to be local and authentic, not derived from the dictates of force by external powers.

These possible developments are independent of Israel, which does not possess levers of influence for designing its environment. Direct involvement by Israel in designing new political arrangements in the Middle East, even if it were possible, might well saddle Israel with responsibility for the failure of efforts at stabilization and the continuation of chaos. At the same time, Israel should prepare for the disintegration scenarios, and should take action out of the public eye to improve its connections and relations with ethnic groups that are not hostile to it, such as the Kurds, Druze, and other minorities. The particular nature of an arrangement emerging in the region is likely to affect Israel's security and strategic situation. Extending Israel's connections and cooperation with local groups and communities will therefore improve its strategic status in advance of the formation of a different order in the Middle East.

In any case, open and covert humanitarian aid from Israel to local communities and minorities in its strategic environment is likely to constitute a positive lever for improving its status among populations and ethnic groups and better its future situation. Israel would do well to change its approach, which holds that the future of the region is unpredictable – an axiom that has been borne out repeatedly over the past five years. Nevertheless, a change of direction is required, involving a more active role vis-à-vis actors with potential for cooperation in the future. At the same time, both continued monitoring of deep currents and a thorough study of the culture, history, religion, and tribalism in the Middle East are necessary in order to understand how to promote Israel's interests.

Notes

- 1 It appears that the federal model in a regional format (meaning a central government managing whole countries) is less suitable to the current regional area, in part because of the absence of a central and legitimate actor capable of leading a regional federation. This model therefore deals with an internal state federation.

