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The World and the Middle East in 2021: Four Scenarios

Itai Brun

What will the world look like one year from now, and how will the corona pandemic affect the Middle East? This article presents four possible scenarios: “continuation,” in which following a temporary interruption of a few months, there is a resumption of familiar global and regional trends from the pre-corona era; “revolution,” in which there is a fundamental change in the patterns that characterized life before the crisis and the world prepares for a new illiberal world order led by China; “breakdown,” in which all global actors emerge wounded from the crisis and the fragile structure of the international system collapses into chaos, expressed inter alia by new waves of upheaval in the Middle East; and “reconstruction,” in which the United States regains its initiative and resumes an international effort to repair the liberal world order and solve burning conflicts. This is not an attempt to predict the future, but a planning tool that can help us think about and prepare for the future. Each of these scenarios poses serious challenges for Israel that require deliberation, monitoring, and preparation.

Over the last few weeks, analysts, commentators, and practitioners have debated the global consequences of the coronavirus. While there are divergent views, in most cases the crisis is described as a seminal event of historic proportions that will materially change the world we live in. In this it resembles previous pandemics, world wars, global economic crises, and other significant historic events. Along with the sweeping agreement on this aspect, there are a number of crucial opposing contentions, such as, will the pandemic create new historic trends, or will it accelerate existing trends? And of course, what will be the image of the new world order shaped by the effects of the coronavirus?

The debate about the possible future consequences of the crisis has practical value, and thus must continue alongside efforts to manage the crisis itself. It is vital for understanding the long term impact of decisions made now, for identifying threats and opportunities, and also for facilitating actions that will shape reality in desired ways. The tool used in this article is “possible futures,” a set of imaginary scenarios anchored in the current circumstances that tell various strategic stories about the world in general, and the Middle East in particular in a year’s time, in April 2021. At work is not an attempt to predict the

future, rather a planning tool that can help decision makers and the general public think about and prepare for future.

The corona crisis began at the end of a decade that was characterized by growing strategic competition between the powers, ongoing regional upheavals in the Middle East, globalization that blurred physical borders, and an information revolution that has changed world orders. The scenarios are driven by the underlying assumption that the pandemic affects reality in three principal ways: (a) it forces the competing global and regional players to organize in ways that could change and undermine the already fragile structure of the existing order; (b) it disrupts the normal course of life, and thus prompted significant events and developments that would otherwise not occur; (c) it is a mechanism for killing and destruction, that has caused ongoing harm to public health, economies, and social interactions.

Scenario 1. Continuation: a temporary halt and return to previous trends

According to this optimistic scenario, most countries will manage to control the spread of the virus by summer 2020, and some of the larger economies will return to a level of activity similar to the situation before the crisis: China in the third quarter of the year, the United States in the fourth quarter, and Europe in the first quarter of 2021. Industries such as aviation, tourism, and restaurants will be severely damaged, but others will grow, with the emphasis on delivery services and remote working. Toward late 2020, life will gradually return to normal, with modus operandi familiar from before the crisis, even if they are accompanied by necessary precautionary measures. Flights will restart, employees will return to workplaces, and entertainment and leisure venues will gradually reopen. The education system will return to normal operation at the start of the next school year.

In this scenario, the shaky and polarized world order will not change, and the same international trends that characterized the situation before the crisis will dominate. Competition between the powers will continue (and perhaps even intensify), accompanied by the respective difficulties in dealing with global and regional challenges.

For the rest of the year, the United States will be focused on the November presidential elections, and the result will have profound importance. During the campaign, President Donald Trump will likely continue to accuse China of responsibility for the crisis, and may also decide to withdraw American forces from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan (due to numerous cases of infection and military threats to the forces, and to improve his chances of re-election). A central feature of the election campaign for both Republicans and Democrats will presumably be a huge aid program to repair the US economy. China, for its part, will provide information and assistance on corona to countries in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, and will also seek to strengthen its influence in these areas by means

of strategic investments. Russia will exploit opportunities in the Middle East (including Syria) and in other arenas. European countries will endeavor to overcome the harsh outcomes of the crisis, with their severe criticism of the European Union in the background.

In the Middle East, the coronavirus will exacerbate fundamental problems (gaps in governance and function, unemployment, corruption, inequality, and dependence on oil and external aid), but in this scenario, the regimes manage to survive. However, it is certainly possible that once the crisis is over, the popular protests that were widespread in 2019 will resume. All the powers in the region will seek to avoid escalation, but escalation could certainly occur over the coming year (in Syria, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip) around Israeli attacks to foil existing and emerging threats, or activity by rebel factions. In this scenario, Iran will resume its previous defiant attitude in terms of regional dominance and nuclear power.

Scenario 2. Revolution: a new illiberal world order led by China

As time passes and the crisis continues, the likelihood of the second scenario will increase. Preventive measures will continue to some extent until the end of 2020 and perhaps even longer, whether due to new waves of COVID-19 outbreaks or the failure of most countries to remove restrictions imposed on daily life without a spike in the curve of serious illness and mortality. In these circumstances, the daily routine of most people in the world will change in a way that reinforces trends recorded in recent months – social distancing, move to online working, reliance on deliveries, and avoidance of public transport and crowded places.

China's actions in response to the virus outbreak are more suitable for dealing with the ongoing crisis that unfolds into this scenario. It is therefore possible that there will be a significant gap between China's early recovery (maybe even in the last quarter of this year) and the ongoing problems in the crisis management process and late recovery of the United States, perhaps only in the second quarter of 2021. In this situation it would be difficult to hold the presidential elections in the United States in November 2020, and the questioned legitimacy of the results could undermine and hamper vital decisions (for example, if there are lengthy appeals to the Supreme Court on the results).

China is already waging a broad public relations campaign to present itself as a world leader in the struggle against the coronavirus. In this scenario, it could exploit American weakness to achieve a position that would lead, in the longer term, toward an illiberal world order based on strong and separate sovereign nation states, each with its own identity. In such an illiberal order, each state would respect the identity and sovereignty of its neighbors, so that all could live in peace and even trade with each other. However, such an order denies the idea of universal individual and civil rights, crossing borders and cultures,

and prefers nation states to international institutions. Such a world order would also be supported by the Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Chinese model of capitalist autocracy (an authoritative regime and centralized economy together with a market economy and the use of advanced and intrusive mechanisms for tracking and supervision) could be a source of inspiration with increasing appeal even in democratic states as the emergency situation drags on. Tracking and control mechanisms (based on big data and artificial intelligence) that were implemented at the start of the crisis will continue to operate, and some countries will also adopt the idea of national “internet islands,” separate from the global network, in the Chinese format. China for its part will make use of the aid and investment mechanisms in various countries to obtain commercial, security, and personal information.

In the Middle East, this scenario could lead to considerable differences in how countries handle the virus crisis. Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and the Gulf states will use their strong security systems and will be more successful (with important Chinese assistance) at dealing with the pandemic. This will probably also be the case in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. However, in war regions such as Yemen, Libya, and Syria, a huge humanitarian crisis is likely to emerge. In this scenario, it will be easier for the international community to overlook Iran’s defiant moves over nuclear development. This will largely be due to the dominance of China and Russia, and follow the adoption of the concept underlying the illiberal world order regarding the sovereignty of individual states and unwillingness to interfere in their affairs.

Scenario 3. Breakdown: undermining the existing order, chaos, and violent conflicts

In the third scenario, the outbreaks of the coronavirus will not be brought under control before the development of a vaccine in another 18 months or two years. In this case, the world’s large economies will be far from their levels of before the crisis, and it is doubtful they will return to that position before the middle of the decade. In these circumstances, all global players will emerge from the crisis beaten and wounded, and the world order will be dominated by chaos. The United States will lose its global status, and voices will be heard questioning the effectiveness and necessity of the federal framework. However, both China and Russia will also fail to recover from the crisis (particularly if it becomes clear that the extent of the epidemic in both countries was far greater than officially announced).

This scenario would see a global food crisis, waves of nationalist violence, and violent clashes – even in the center of Europe. The mechanisms of international cooperation (the UN, the European Union, and the World Health Organization) will be silenced, neutralized, or dismantled.

Such a scenario could lead to a new wave of regional upheavals in the Middle East, with a broad humanitarian crisis, particularly in densely populated cities and refugee camps, and the collapse of government systems. In these circumstances, the war in Syria could restart in various ways; Hezbollah could take control of Lebanon following the collapse of state mechanisms; in Iran there could be extensive violent clashes between the regime and the public (as in 2009); total chaos could develop in the Gaza Strip (as in Somalia); and the Palestinian Authority could break up into local autonomous entities. The Islamic State, or another jihadist organization, could emerge from such upheavals and using young, hardened fighters from prison camps, take control of wide areas of Iraq, Syria, Egypt (Sinai Peninsula), Libya, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

Scenario 4. Reconstruction: a US-led international effort to preserve the liberal world order

Under the fourth scenario too, the preventive measures against corona outbreaks will continue throughout the world, to various degrees, at least until the end of 2020. However, in June and July 2020 reports will start to appear showing that China has in fact concealed the enormous extent of contagion and deaths (for example, two million infected cases and over 100,000 deaths). Such reports will lead to a crisis in the Chinese leadership and the resignation of Chinese President Xi Jinping and his associates. At the same time, many countries will decide to break free of a supply chain that relies on China as a center of world manufacture.

However, the center of gravity for this scenario is the United States. It assumes that the presidential elections take place in November 2020, and the Democratic candidate wins a clear, unequivocal victory. One month later the FDA will approve a vaccine developed in an American research institute. The United States will regain its initiative and from January 2021 lead a joint effort by Western liberal democracies to help the world deal with corona outbreaks, overcome the economic depression, preserve the liberal order, and solve burning regional conflicts. This scenario highlights the enormous importance of the position of the United States leadership, which it effectively waived in the Trump era. The 2020 elections are therefore also an opportunity for the growth of a new American leadership for the democratic-liberal concept. This leadership would work with other leaders who have been prominent in Western countries during the current crisis.

In this scenario assistance is also given to countries in the Middle East. Talks are held on an improved nuclear agreement with Iran, and it could also lead to an international conference and a process of arrangements, similar to the process led by the US leadership in the 1990s. There could possibly be a renewed demand for regimes in the Middle East and other areas to take steps toward democratization.

Conclusion

The two main variables underlying the scenarios are the degree to which outbreaks of coronavirus can be controlled, and the depth of the ongoing damage to economies due to how the virus is handled. All four scenarios are, of course, hypothetical and reflect possible strategic stories based on these variables and other developments, some of which have a basis in the current situation. The scenarios are worded in a way that tries to overcome a “failure of imagination” that makes it hard to see possible developments, while being careful to avoid exaggerating the effects of an event that has yet to take place.

Merging the scenarios into one central story, also affected by the heated debate of the subject over recent weeks, creates a logical scenario in which all the international actors are engrossed in internal affairs in the near future. However, the competition between the powers will continue around the emerging battle to shape the narrative of the most effective way of handling the crisis. The trend of the East growing in influence will continue and perhaps even accelerate. Nation states will grow stronger, because of their generally effective ways of dealing with the pandemic. The world will not change completely, but will be less free – the emergency measures and intrusive supervision mechanisms will continue; will enjoy less prosperity, with more unemployed and more poor; and be less global – we’ll fly less, we’ll work more from home, we’ll be less inclined to crowd into cities, and states will be careful to stock strategic reserves and maintain the independence of their essential industries.

These four scenarios present additional variations on the state of affairs. Each invites questions dealing with the implications for Israel’s national security: in the first scenario (continuation), it is important to examine how the trends in April 2021 will differ from those perceived before the crisis, since the circumstances created during and following the pandemic result in a different context, which could either reinforce or counter those trends. In the second scenario (revolution), the possible implications for the Middle East and for Israel of an illiberal world order led by China should be examined seriously. In the third scenario (breakdown) it is important to examine the possible nature of a further wave of upheavals in the Middle East, and in particular the outcomes of a collapse of government systems and the consequences of the revival of the jihadist camp. In the fourth scenario (reconstruction), the implications of the new world order for the Middle East should be assessed.

Events in the strategic environment can also have implications for the operational environment – the nature of military conflicts and military force buildups, both governmental and non-governmental. This matter requires a separate discussion, but periods in which states and organizations with political obligations are preoccupied with internal affairs are characterized by the growth of non-state organizations with no such

obligations. It is possible that the dramatic response in all countries to the corona outbreak will lead various elements to lend greater priority to the development and acquisition of biological weapons. And finally, at least in Israel and Western countries, national budgets will likely be diverted to rehabilitate the economy and the health system at the expense of defense budgets and budgets for other civilian needs.