The Turmoil in the Middle East

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Since the start of the previous decade, and especially in the past four years, the Middle East has experienced upheavals that will change the face of the region for many years to come. This turmoil has several sources: the United States occupation of Iraq in 2003, which altered the country's political structure and military capabilities for the foreseeable future; the socio-political turbulence, originally called the "Arab Spring," experienced by many regimes in the Arab world; the growing strength of radical Islamic groups in the Arab world; and the appearance in the region of a new type of terrorist organization, which started with the rise of al-Qaeda and assumed a new, more extreme form with the Islamic State (IS) organization.

The severity of the turmoil is reflected in a series of unprecedented developments. Uprisings at home or outside intervention have toppled five Arab regimes (in Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen), and another regime (in Syria) is under grave threat. The regimes that were toppled have not yet been replaced by strong and stable governments. On the contrary, in the Middle East and its periphery, weak regimes have sprung up that do not control all of the territory in their respective countries. In these areas,

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control has partly been supplanted by terrorist organizations and armed militias, which project a serious threat both to the local populations and to their neighbors. Hundreds of thousands of people, most of them civilians, have been killed in civil wars, primarily in Iraq and Syria, and to a more limited extent in Libya and Yemen. Millions have become refugees, with some of them displaced within their own countries and others fleeing to neighboring states.

After four years of turmoil, it is difficult to say that the uprising has led to a positive reversal in the nature and essence of the Arab regimes. A new actor whose voice was barely heard in the past has appeared on the political stage, in the form of the masses in the streets and squares, but its appearance has contributed little to expanding and deepening democratic processes in Arab states, which have proven that they are still not ripe for a full democratic revolution. On another level, in the first years of the uprising, political Islam appeared to be occupying a key position in the Arab world, especially after the Muslim Brotherhood became a rising force in Egypt and succeeded in gaining power through democratic elections in mid-2012. However, within a year, it was ousted by the army, and while it remained a significant actor outside the Egyptian political system, its removal harmed political Islam in the entire Arab world – outside of Egypt as well – and it is now examining its future course of action.

The turmoil in the Arab states has exacerbated the existing weakness of the Arab world. Since the 1970s the Arab world has lacked a leader and leadership, and has not been able to unite in a common approach to the main problems before it. Non-Arab countries – Iran, Turkey, and partly Israel as well – have taken the place of Arab leaders in setting the regional agenda. The weakness of the Arab camp has been further aggravated by the fact that Iraq and Syria, both key countries in the region, are today paralyzed, and even Egypt, the leader of the Arab world, is immersed in its domestic problems. Furthermore, several Arab militaries, particularly those of Iraq and Syria, have lost a significant portion of their capabilities, while some of the weapon systems that were in their possession, as well as in the possession of the Libyan army, have fallen into the hands of jihadi organizations and are being used in the fight against their adversaries.

The internal crises in Arab countries have thus far failed to impact on the domestic situation in Iran. However, Iran has been influenced by them in other ways, especially by the events in the countries closest to it. The threat to the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Iran's main ally in the region, prompted Iran to send Revolutionary Guards advisors and military and economic aid to Syria to assist the regime. Iraq's civil war, underway since 2003, has provided Iran with an historic opportunity to become the most influential outside player in Iraq, especially among the Shiites. The rise of Islamic State threatens Iran's outposts in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and has forced the Iranian regime to cope with this threat as well, but at the same time has made Iran an important player in stabilizing the situation in these countries. And in another corner of the region, the collapse of the governmental system in Yemen and the appearance of the Houthis as a major actor, who are from the Zaidi sect of Shiite Islam and have longstanding ties with Tehran, are playing into the hands of Iran and helping it build an outpost of influence at the entrance to the Red Sea and south of Saudi Arabia.

The United States was dragged into the vacuum in the region – especially during the George W. Bush administration, but also today, with a president who seeks to liberate the United States from the role of the world's policeman – in an attempt to thwart the threats to it and to its allies. This attempt was translated into military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, in an aim to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and in efforts to bring about the fall of the Assad regime and the defeat of IS. However, the United States in 2015 is not what it was in the 1990s and the early part of the previous decade, when it remained the sole superpower after the fall of the Soviet Union and dared to carry out extensive military operations in the Middle East. The challenges with which the United States has had to contend since the start of the current century have illustrated the limitations of its power. Its intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, which left both countries in chaos at a cost of thousands of Americans dead; its difficulty in coping with major problems in the region such as the Iranian nuclear threat, the Palestinian problem, and the appearance of Islamic State; and criticism from its allies in the Middle East and Europe have all harmed its standing in the Middle East and eroded its ability to undertake moves that would reduce the turmoil and sources of tension in the region. Yet despite these difficulties, there is

no alternative superpower in the Middle East of equal weight, and new turbulence inevitably prompts appeals by Arab and Western states that expect the United States to lead the management of the crisis.

The critical regional issues that today are at the center of the turmoil in the Middle East are the result of processes unfolding over many years. These processes highlight the weakening of several Arab regimes, including key regimes such as Syria and Iraq, along with the rise of non-state actors with unprecedented power. The element leading such actors today is jihadi organizations, headed by Islamic State, which are perceived as the main threat emanating from the Middle East. These organizations not only challenge the future of several regimes in the region, but also the territorial integrity of particular states. This requires an examination of these organizations' methods of struggle and the ability of the United States and its allies to stop the new threats in the region, influence the regional agenda, and stabilize the Middle East.

Background to the Contemporary Upheavals in the Arab World

The socio-political dysfunction that characterizes much of the Arab world early in the twenty-first century may not be unique to the Middle East, but it is clearly more virulent and violent than almost anywhere else. In some sense, this degeneration is an historical continuation of the breakdown of legitimacy and authority of the Ottoman Empire, widely known during the nineteenth century as "the sick man of Europe," and can be traced to the inability of Islamic reform movements to meet the challenges of modernity with a formula that satisfactorily balances cultural tradition with the need for change, or in other words, effectively straddles authenticity and modernization. The failure of the Ottoman reformers to meet this objective produced and perpetuated identity conflicts that have left their imprint on every former Ottoman territory, including the Balkans and Turkey itself (and are replicated in South Asia as well). But their most acute consequences have been felt in the Arab-populated areas of the Middle East, perhaps because of the singular historical relationship between ethnic/national identity and religious identity: the Arabs produced Islam, while others only imported it or had it imposed on them.

Whatever the reason, the result is a paroxysm of sectarianism, intolerance, violence, and failed states, with highly negative consequences for the region and beyond. These manifestations of identity conflicts are not solely the failed aftermath of the so-called "Arab Spring." They are an integral part of the political history of the modern Middle East, which is replete with sorry episodes of discrimination and repression, often violent, of populations that differ in some important way from the dominant identity marker of the polity.

However, it would be inaccurate to argue that the prevalence of discrimination and repression is the byproduct of authoritarian regimes. Indeed, in most twentieth century Middle Eastern political systems, authoritarian regimes actually acted to contain the inclinations of the various social formations, and it was the weakening or rupture of the shell of the "hard state" that unleashed the most vicious sectarian conflicts (as was also the case in the former Yugoslavia).

There is no single cause for the breakup of Middle East states. In the most important and formative instances, it was the outcome of foreign conflict and/or foreign intervention, as was the case with Iraq, Libya, and indeed, the Ottoman Empire itself. In others, it was the consequence of intrinsically flawed state creation, as with Iraq and – many would argue – Syria and Lebanon (as well as Pakistan). And in some cases, it was the modernizing efforts of authoritarian rulers themselves – in the belief that this was necessary to enhance the power and prosperity of their states – that simultaneously intensified both outrage and hope among certain domestic constituencies. For example, the Shah of Iran's modernizing White Revolution in the early 1960s (including efforts to equalize the validity of the testimony of non-Muslims in court, contrary to *sharia*) helped energize Islamist opposition to his rule. Some see a similar pattern in Egypt following the decades-long efforts of Anwar Sadat and Husni Mubarak – though hesitant and arguably incompetent – to accommodate Western pressure for liberalization and democratization. In both cases, the backlash helped break state power and enabled Islamist forces to prevail over other anti-regime elements – briefly in Egypt, and for a considerably longer period in Iran (though the final historical verdict there is of course not yet in).

The greatest pathologies of identity ambiguity are naturally found in the most demographically heterogeneous societies, i.e., where the ethnic,

confessional, or (in the case of Libya) tribal identities persist and triumph over any all-encompassing sense of shared civic culture or sense of citizenship. Hence the ferocity of the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and (in the past and perhaps again in the future) Lebanon. This is a universal problem to be confronted in every heterogeneous society, but it appears at the present moment in history to be particularly daunting in Muslim-majority societies, if only because the prescribed conflation of religion and state is much more explicit in Islam than in other major religions; there is no injunction to render unto God what is God's and render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, nor much ideational foundation for the idea of individual sovereignty, distinct from that of the *umma*. That complicates the obstacles to reformers, who find themselves in an ideologically defensive and even apologetic posture because they need to argue that the reforms they advocate are somehow consistent with Islam rather than intrinsically valid, legitimate, and imperative regardless of their relationship to Islamic strictures.

There can be no stable resolution of the conflicts currently wracking the Arab world without a fundamental redefinition of relations between religion and society, society and state, and state and individual, that is, without a comprehensive process of reformation and enlightenment from within. Given the record of Islamic reform over the last two centuries, the prospects of this happening within any meaningful time frame are slim, at best. In any event, ideological transformation of this magnitude is beyond the capacity of outsiders, however well-meaning, to bring about.

Non-State Actors in the Middle East

In the past year, the issue of terror in its broad sense has once again assumed center stage in the international arena. This prominence is mainly a result of the fact that the Islamic State organization, also known as ISIS or ISIL, has been placed on the global public agenda. At the same time, other sub-state actors operate throughout the Middle East, and they are an integral part of the global jihad ideological movement. These organizations exploit the turbulence in the region so as to consolidate their position and threaten the stability of various Middle East regimes. In order to understand the level of the threat posed by sub-state organizations, the various groups and their

respective threat levels must be characterized separately, and the relationships and rivalries between them must be understood.

The influence of the Islamic State organization, which is currently the main threat to stability in the Middle East, may expand from the regional to the global level. The organization is a kind of hybrid creature that began to operate as a sub-state organization, and grew following its conquest of much territory in Iraq and Syria – and in essence the elimination of the border between them – and its declaration of the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the areas it took over. In the current situation, Islamic State and the territory under its control can be defined as an Islamic state-like entity that functions in state-like fashion vis-à-vis the population it controls. The group has proven itself as the dominant organization in Iraq, and it aims to pose a threat to Baghdad and the Iraqi government. It has taken control of weapons and considerable resources in the territories it has seized and has managed to accumulate significant economic assets. Islamic State successes have led to a de facto split in Iraq, threatening the territorial integrity of the country. In Syria too, Islamic State has succeeded in taking over a number of regions, particularly in the areas of Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor. It has also threatened to take over the town of Kobane, where there is a large Kurdish minority. Had Kobane been conquered, this would result in Islamic State control over some of the border area between Syria and Turkey. The IS goal is to take over additional territory in Syria and divide the country in a fashion similar to the divisions in Iraq.

In Syria, in addition to Islamic State, there are many sub-state opposition groups that aspire to topple the Assad regime. These groups are bound together in two main fronts, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is secular, and the Islamic Front, which is religious. There is also a Salafist jihadi camp operating in Syria. Aside from Islamic State, another prominent member of this camp is Jabhat al-Nusra, a branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, which seeks to downplay this affiliation and focuses at this stage on the struggle to overthrow the Assad regime while cooperating ad hoc with the FSA and groups that are part of the Islamic Front.

The conflict in Syria has spilled over into Lebanon, and because Hizbollah and forces from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards have intervened on behalf of the Assad regime, they have become a main target for attacks by Salafist

jihadi groups from Syria and Lebanon. The main groups operating against Hizbollah and the Revolutionary Guards are al-Nusra Front and Islamic State, as well as Abdullah Azzam Brigades and other Salafist jihadi groups in the Nahr el-Bard refugee camp in the north of the country and the Ein al-Hilweh camp in the south. After Sunni sheikh Abu Munzir al-Shanqiti issued a *fatwa* encouraging suicide operations against Hizbollah, these organizations carried out thirteen attacks this year against Shiite strongholds affiliated with Hizbollah in the Bekaa Valley and Beirut.

Other Middle Eastern countries have also seen activity by a number of sub-state organizations that have grown stronger over the past year. Operations by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt, for example, have been especially noteworthy. The group, established in late 2011 against the backdrop of turbulence following the toppling of the Mubarak regime, stepped up its activities after the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from power. This jihadi organization has increased its terrorist operations in the Sinai Peninsula significantly in the past year, attempting especially to target security forces and the Egyptian army. It has resorted to a variety of methods, including suicide attacks, sabotage of oil and gas pipelines, ambushes, and assassinations of soldiers and senior commanders in the police and army. The organization, along with other groups such as Ajnad al-Misr, has also carried out attacks in the heart of Cairo and Ismailiya. In late 2014, it transferred its support from al-Qaeda by swearing an oath of allegiance to Islamic State and considerably strengthened its ties with this organization. Especially noteworthy in this context was the depth of cooperation between Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Salafist jihadi groups in Gaza, such as the Mujahidin Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem and a new group that declared its establishment last year, the Islamic State in Gaza. These jihadi groups in Gaza took an active though not central role in the fighting against IDF forces in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge, launching several dozen rockets at Israel. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis also shot a number of rockets at the border with Israel and even sent a suicide bomber to the Kerem Shalom crossing on the Gaza-Israel border, who was caught before he was able to carry out his attack. This trend toward cooperation, and particularly identification with Islamic State actions, both in Egypt and in Gaza, could make a conspicuous imprint on terrorist activity in the near future.

In the past year, Jordan experienced no terrorist attacks by global jihadi elements. However, the political turmoil in the Middle East since the start of the Arab Spring, and in particular, Islamic State's actions in the region, has burdened the kingdom with over 1,500,000 refugees from Iraq and Syria. This, along with the increased social unrest in Jordan, expressed inter alia in demonstrations of solidarity with Islamic State and global jihad, could lead to violent actions and terrorist attacks in the kingdom. One of the declared objectives of Islamic State is to infiltrate Jordan, and the organization already has cells in a number of places in the country, such as Maan, Zarqa, and Irbid. Therefore, the connection between its uncompromising extremist ideology and public dissatisfaction could be reflected in future terrorist activity, despite the impressive efficiency of the Jordanian security forces.

Along with considerable momentum in global jihadi activity in the Middle East and beyond due primarily to expanding Islamic State influence around the world, there are fierce rivalries among the various groups, both ideological and organizational, because of a dispute between Islamic State leaders and leaders of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The results of this competition are expected to influence the nature of the activity of the respective groups and the degree of their determination to harness terrorist activity to succeed in the internal struggle for popular support. On the other hand, the internal conflict on the jihadi front could serve as an important and effective tool in the struggle to weaken the various organizations.

Thus, it appears that at least in the coming year, sub-state organizations in the Middle East will continue to be a major factor in the attempt to undermine the stability of the existing regimes in the region. Organizations identified with global jihad, whether they belong to the Islamic State camp or that of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, will likely continue to work to change the regional order that has existed since the days of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in order to realize their vision of establishing an Islamic caliphate in the Arab Levant. The anti-Islamic State campaign declared by a coalition of more than sixty Western and Arab countries in the second half of 2014 is expected to strengthen the ability of the Syrian, Jordanian, Libyan, and even Egyptian, Lebanese, and Iraqi regimes to survive the stepped-up Salafist jihadi campaign. Its success or failure will have a decisive influence on the image of the Middle East way beyond the coming year.

The direct and indirect threat posed to Israel by Salafist jihadi elements operating within its borders and outside the country is liable to increase. In Syria, al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda, and Islamic State are focused on the effort to topple the Assad regime. However, if there is no decisive victory in Syria in the next year but rather a military stalemate, Israel could find itself a target of military activity from Syria and possibly also from Lebanon, both as a response to coalition attacks on jihadi organization outposts and because Israel is seen as these organizations' sworn enemy that helps the coalition. At the same time, given the anticipated return of veterans of the battle zones and training camps of Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East to their countries of origin, attempts to carry out terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets in various countries are liable to increase.

The Core Areas of Turbulence

The Civil War in Syria and the Ramifications for Neighboring States

The Syrian civil war that erupted nearly four years ago represents a clear watershed in the Middle East, with the still unfolding conflict bound to have deep and long term repercussions on the region. First, the war has unleashed an urgent humanitarian crisis of major magnitude: over the past three years, more than 3.8 million Syrians have fled their country (on top of the approximately 7.5 internally displaced persons). Most have sought refuge in neighboring states, in turn creating substantial economic, social, demographic, and political pressure on the host countries (especially in the cases of Jordan and Lebanon). Second, the war has exacerbated preexisting cleavages within the region, resulting not only in a worsening of sectarian relations, but also in a fueling of extremism – most notably by providing a territorial base and a cause célèbre for would-be jihadists from the Middle East and elsewhere throughout the world.

Looking ahead, the picture remains grim. Regarding Syria, the regional epicenter of instability, it is likely that in the short and medium terms the civil war will continue, with the country in effect divided between a multitude of different, and often competing, authorities and systems. Indeed, despite the fact that the situation on the battlefield is highly variable on a tactical

level, strategically there is a painful stalemate. In this sense, the ongoing international efforts against the Islamic State organization in Syria are unlikely to tip the balance of power in favor of the opposition forces. With no immediate end in sight, it appears inevitable that ongoing processes of state disintegration and destruction of the country's social fabric will continue, in turn creating a monumental and generational challenge for the day after. Eventually a stable termination of the civil war will require both a grand bargain and a political agreement between the main parties, as well as a strong involvement of key regional sponsors like Iran or Saudi Arabia to help broker the political transition. Lacking both the domestic as well as the regional political will to move in this direction, it is likely that the country's immediate future will be characterized by the continuation of the conflict and the de facto partition of Syria, with disastrous consequences for the country's human security.

The process of disintegration of Syria will clearly continue to have negative consequences for virtually for its neighboring countries. First, Lebanon, historically tied to Syria at the political, social, cultural, and political levels, will remain deeply affected by the Syrian civil war. Even though in the past few months Lebanon has de facto severely restricted the influx of refugees in the country, the tiny country of roughly 4.5 million is nonetheless currently struggling to host over 1.1 million Syrians. Given the severity of the civil war, it is expected that most of the refugees will remain in Lebanon in the medium and long terms, generating significant challenges not just in terms of emergency assistance but also in terms of longer term integration in the state. In addition, Lebanon's political system will likely continue to be deeply polarized on the basis of a sectarian-political cleavage and the Sunni-Shia divide, in turn impairing the effectiveness of the political system. Furthermore, the civil war has been a catalyst of radicalization within the country, with a general rise in the profile and activism of Salafi jihadi groups. Finally, and in addition to these local groups, other organizations like Jabhat al-Nusra and IS have targeted Lebanon and its security services, demonstrating that the more the civil war in Syria drags on, the more the blurred borders between the two countries will define the new reality.

Another country that will remain affected by the regional instability and the Syrian civil war is Jordan, not only because of the political, social,

and economic pressure derived from hosting more than 600,000 thousand officially registered Syrian refugees (with the actual number closer to one million), a significant challenge for the country's weak economy. Jordan's ongoing economic crisis as well as its rampant unemployment has over the past three years sparked several rounds of protest, often coupled with demands for political liberalization. Despite the tangible discontent, however, it appears the King remains relatively stable, although the pressure to address both political as well as socio-economic grievances will likely continue. The Syrian civil war and the rise of Islamic State have also heightened Jordan's security threats. Given the growing concern over potential IS cells and other radical Islam groups in Jordan, the kingdom has placed increased attention on protecting its internal security needs, monitoring internal processes of radicalization, and tracking IS activities.

Iraq has likewise been deeply affected by the Syrian conflict. The civil war in Syria has exacerbated preexisting internal cleavages and underscored the failures of the post-2003 process of state building. In this sense, the rise of IS in Iraq can be seen as clear testimony of the failures of the political system and central government, as well as the success of the organization in Syria. The defeat of IS in Iraq will require not only a military approach, but more fundamentally a profound revision of the political system and adoption of a more inclusive and transparent political model. Meanwhile, IS will continue to operate in the areas it has seized in Iraq and Syria, working not only to increase its coffers but also to expand the areas under its control. Iraq is currently experiencing deep internal instability, along with poor governance and military weakness, which in turn strengthens not only the status of IS but also the existing trend of a weakened central government and strengthened local autonomies; Iraqi Kurdistan is the most obvious example of this trend.

Finally, the Syrian civil war is exerting an increasingly noticeable effect on Turkey. Some 1.6 million refugees have fled from Syria to Turkey, and while of Syria's neighboring states Turkey is unquestionably the best equipped, both politically and economically, to deal with the refugees, the ongoing humanitarian crisis has begun to exact a social, political, and financial toll. The fact that more than 80 percent of the refugee population is located outside refugee camps in five districts in southern and southeastern Turkey

makes the situation particularly urgent. The areas with a substantive refugee population are rife with social tensions. Second, the challenge to the central government in Syria and the increase of armed groups there create additional problems for Turkey, which shares a 900 km border with Syria. The rise of IS in particular presents Turkey, which generally supported opponents of the Assad regime, with a difficult dilemma, as it now confronts the reality – based on its previous underestimate – of the jihadist challenge in Syria and Iraq. Third, the conflict in Syria affects Turkey's problematic relations with its Kurdish population, as demonstrated by the increased tension following Turkey's refusal to permit Kurdish forces fighting IS to cross the border to reach the city of Kobane.

Other Regimes in the Eye of the Storm

Egypt is not immune to the effects of the radicalization in the region. The turmoil in the country in the wake of the fall of the Mubarak regime has generated two principal security problems. One is that the army's ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government in mid-2013 created a rift between the Brotherhood and the new regime headed by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Attempts supported by Western governments to heal the rift and bring about the Muslim Brotherhood's inclusion in the government were unsuccessful, and the parties moved to the path of conflict. The regime suspects that the Muslim Brotherhood is connected to terrorist organizations and terrorist attacks, which have spread throughout the country, even though this connection is not definitive and the US administration claims there is no proof of its existence. But beyond the confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood, the el-Sisi regime will be required to continue to cope with the currents of change that have surfaced in Egypt over the past four years, including the more liberal youth of the revolution and the dire economic situation in the country.

The second problem facing Egypt is the significant increase in terrorist attacks since 2011, especially in the Sinai Peninsula and in western Egypt near the border with Libya, that from time to time have spilled over into the cities as well. These attacks are directed against security forces and economic targets in the effort to undermine internal security and the economic situation, and thereby harm the stability of the regime. The most active terrorist

organization is Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which operates primarily in Sinai, but also near the border with Libya. The group has pledged its allegiance to Islamic State, which has infiltrated into Egypt, and it has an increasingly close relationship with jihadi organizations in Gaza.

Sinai saw terrorist activity during the year the Muslim Brotherhood ruled in Egypt, but at a much lower rate. In the face of the growth of terrorist operations, the current regime has increased its preemptive actions in Sinai, including through air strikes, and has expanded destruction of smuggling tunnels on the border with Gaza. The killing of sixty members of the security forces in two terror attacks in northern Sinai, in late October 2014 and late January 2015, led to a regime assessment that Islamic State is stepping up its activity in Sinai in cooperation with Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. The government then announced the establishment of a 1 km-wide security zone along the border between Gaza and Sinai, and began to evacuate 800 homes and some 10,000 residents of Egyptian Rafah.

In the past, especially in the mid-1990s, the Egyptian government struggled – successfully – with waves of terror by extremist Islamic organizations. This time, the task is more difficult. There are more terror operatives, they are active in areas that the government is hard pressed to control, they receive aid from Bedouin tribes, and Libya is a large supplier of weapons and serves as a base for jihadi operations. A large force will be required to halt the current wave of terror, along with a political effort both to stop the aid that flows to the terrorist organizations and to isolate these groups. However, there appears to be a reasonable chance that the government will defeat the organizations, even if this requires considerable time.

Over the past two years Libya has become a failed state. It has two governments, two parliaments, two armies, and two chiefs of staff. A drawn-out and difficult civil war is underway with the result that hundreds of thousands of civilians have fled from their homes, and others are seeking refuge outside the country. In tandem, Libya has become a haven for terrorist groups, and jihadi organizations are building outposts there; military councils and armed militias connected to various figures and organizations operate against state institutions, while Libyan armies attempt to rebuff them. Weapons from the enormous stockpiles accumulated by Muammar Qaddafi in the 1980s have reached terrorist organizations in Libya and beyond, including Gaza.

Islamic State has also begun to infiltrate Libya, exploiting the anarchy there, and is mobilizing support from other jihadi organizations, partly in order to infiltrate Egypt. It is no wonder that Libya's deterioration is of major concern to its neighbors, particularly Egypt, which believes that Islamists in Libya and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Islamic State are coordinating their efforts.

Yemen too is joining the group of failed states. For years, al-Qaeda has cultivated a branch in Yemen called al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, with the satellite now considered one of the organization's most dangerous branches and a serious threat to Saudi Arabia. In the past year, the organization has undertaken a broad effort involving terrorist attacks and attacks against security and government officials. But what is more important today is the spread of the Houthi rebellion in 2014. For a decade, the government of Yemen has been fighting the Houthis, who are based in northern Yemen, comprise some 30 percent of the country's population, and are driven by a sense of discrimination. However, in the past year, the Houthis launched a comprehensive military campaign to expand their areas of influence while exploiting the weakness of Yemen's government and army. In September and October of 2014, they took control of Sanaa, the capital, and the important port of al-Hudayda, located on the Red Sea coast.

The result of these developments in Yemen is anarchy, terrorism, inter-tribal fighting, a violent struggle between organizations – mainly between the Houthis and al-Qaeda, and demands to divide the country. But these struggles also have regional ramifications. For years, the Houthis have received aid from Iran, primarily through the Quds Force and the Revolutionary Guards, in part because of their Shiite affiliation. The deterioration in Yemen is cause for concern in Saudi Arabia not only about instability on its southern border, which could spill over into its territory, but also about the possibility that an adjacent Iranian outpost would be established at the opening of the Red Sea.

The Coalition against Islamic State

Since the summer of 2014, the United States has led an international campaign against the Islamic State organization. This campaign has evolved in stages. In the first phase, military and humanitarian support was provided to the central government in Iraq and to unprotected minorities in the country. At the same time, a coalition was formed for a focused military effort in Iraq

and Syria. Western countries (Great Britain, France, Germany, Australia, and others) and Arab countries (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states) joined the United States in the coalition against Islamic State, focusing on air strikes against Islamic State targets; military support for Kurdish forces, Iraqi forces subordinate to the government in Baghdad, and rebels in Syria who are not extremists; and humanitarian aid to the combat zones.

The coalition formulated a strategic goal that was based on two principles: one, a focus on toppling and eliminating Islamic State, without a direct effort to bring about the fall of the Assad regime in Syria; two, avoiding the dispatch of military ground forces and relying on local allies – Iraqi and Kurdish forces, and later, trained pragmatic Syrian opposition forces – as "boots on the ground" in the fight against Islamic State. This was the basis for the drive to inflict serious military and economic harm on Islamic State, which would lead to the elimination of the organization through six coordinated measures: (a) military support for the national unity government in Iraq and the establishment of a force of Syrian rebels who are not members of radical jihadi groups; (b) protection of minorities who are at risk of being slaughtered by Islamic State; (c) attention to the humanitarian crisis in the areas taken over by the organization; (d) halt of the stream of foreign volunteers to Islamic State (Western leaders are troubled by the increasing trend toward enlistment of Western volunteers, especially from European countries); (e) a struggle against Islamic State economic capabilities and sources of funding; and (f) delegitimization of Islamic State ideology.

After a number of months of air strikes by Western-Arab coalition forces, it became clear that a military effort from the air was not enough to stop the growing power of Islamic State forces in Syria and Iraq. As a result, attempts were made, with limited success, to reinforce the military effort by coalition states, including by incorporating special ground forces.

These limited coalition achievements, along with Islamic State achievements in Iraq and Syria, challenge two basic assumptions of President Obama's Middle East policy. First, Obama aspires to establish a special relationship and strategic coordination with Turkey. However, Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has made an unequivocal demand on the issue of Syria: Turkey, as an ally and NATO member, will cooperate in the fight against Islamic State, and in exchange, the United States will embrace the goal of

ousting the Assad regime as soon as possible. This demand places Obama in a difficult bind between the desire for Turkey to participate in the campaign because of its unique geostrategic position, given its long border with Syria and Iraq, and the desire to include Iran in the fight against Islamic State and take full advantage of the opportunity for warmer relations with Iran. A developed channel of coordination between Iran and the US through Iraqi mediation as well as a mechanism for military coordination to prevent friction – deconfliction – demands that the United States refrain from working to topple the Assad regime, at least for now. Although after efforts at persuasion the United States succeeded in mobilizing Turkey for the anti-Islamic State campaign, participation of Turkish forces is limited and is focused on an attempt to close Turkey's border with Iraq and Syria so as to reduce the movement of volunteers and supplies to Islamic State forces. Aside from Erdogan's unresolved issues with Assad, the Turkish leader fears the growing strength of the Kurds in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey as a result of their possible successes against Islamic State.

Second, there is a widespread belief in the US administration that the United States would withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan and use local forces it has trained to establish stability, even without ensuring the existence of a stable, responsible, and effective functioning governmental infrastructure. However, the withdrawal of US troops from these countries created a governmental vacuum whose negative consequences have spread beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus the regional instability has spilled over into other countries, the forces of radicalism have grown stronger, and the functioning state frameworks have disintegrated. Nevertheless, at this stage, the dominant view in the US administration is that the fighting against Islamic State must rely on local ground forces from Iraq, Syria, and Arab states, even though they are weak, lack motivation, and are divided. The dispatch of US forces for a large ground operation is not on the agenda, and the governmental vacuum is being filled by elements sent by Iran: the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards, Shiite militias operating in Iraq, and Hizbollah, which is fighting in Syria and has recently participated in fighting and training of Shiite militias in Iraq as well.

Beyond a reexamination of the fundamental concepts underlying the struggle against Islamic State, coalition forces must update their operational program and improve operational outcomes:

a. The airpower currently arrives primarily from distant airports and relies on intelligence that is not sufficiently accurate. The result of this constraint is limited operational output, because it does not allow a permanent aerial presence over the battlefield. Thus far, coalition countries have carried out a limited number of attacks (several dozen a day). This is not a sufficient critical mass to weaken and neutralize Islamic State forces, and it is not suitable for this type of war against terrorism or guerilla actions, which takes place in urban areas. Islamic State forces have adjusted their activity to the new situation, and it has become very difficult to find high value targets for attack. In order to strike a severe blow and stop IS forces, accurate and relevant intelligence is essential, and hundreds of sorties a day and a continuous aerial presence in the combat zone are needed to gather intelligence and close immediate attack cycles.
b. Coalition planes are attacking economic infrastructures under Islamic State control in order to strike IS sources of income and influence, and thereby damage the supply of electricity, water, and food to the civilian population in the combat zone. However, this drives the population away from supporting coalition forces and brings it closer to Islamic State. For this reason, given the lessons learned from past wars and the current campaign up to this point, coalition forces should limit as much as possible the physical damage to the population not involved in the fighting, ensure that its needs are provided for, and to the extent possible avoid damage to the critical infrastructures for supplying services to civilians.
c. There is a need to reinforce ground troops fighting Islamic State. The coalition relies on troops from the Iraqi army and the moderate opposition in Syria, vestiges of FSA. However, these troops have failed to demonstrate sufficient combat capability, and a concentrated effort is needed to prepare, train, and equip them and increase their motivation to fight. Thousands of foreign advisors from the special forces of the United States and other Western countries are already assisting Iraqi forces, but they must also implement operational mentoring of the troops in combat.

d. Despite the complexity of the challenge, the building and training of units from the moderate Syrian opposition must be accelerated. Furthermore, it is vital to build the infrastructure and power for another rule that will replace the Assad regime in Syria and is not based on jihadist forces. It is difficult to turn bands of armed rebels into an army with operational capabilities and an effective command and control structure, especially given the disintegration of this front and the defection of its fighters to Islamist groups that are also fighting the Assad regime. According to Pentagon estimates, a period of three to five months will be needed in order to recruit experienced fighters from the moderate Syrian opposition and more than a year to train them for combat in the camps in Jordan, Turkey, and elsewhere.
e. Assad's forces are much more determined in their war against the forces of the moderate opposition, which is recoiling from fighting against jihadi forces. Therefore, Assad's forces must be deterred from attacking moderate opposition forces, for example, by establishment of a no-fly zone in northern, southern, and eastern Syria to prevent aircraft not connected to coalition forces from operating there, and thus to prevent attacks by Syrian air force planes and helicopters against the rebels who are not from Islamic State ranks.

For several reasons, the campaign to defeat Islamic State is complicated and formidable. First and foremost is the organization's strength, a result of the support is enjoys in areas under its control and even beyond, reflected in the recruitment of volunteers from around the world and an oath of allegiance to Islamic State taken by jihadi organizations throughout the Arab world, as well as the fear it has sown and disseminated, partly through the use of new media. In addition, the group is demonstrating flexibility and the ability to adapt in order to preserve its freedom of action in accordance with the changing circumstances. Another factor that makes it hard to contend with Islamic State is the limited forces – the reduced order of battle – that the United States and its Western and Arab allies are investing in the campaign. In addition, it is difficult to recruit moderate Arab forces, and as such, there is an insufficient ground force for the fighting and uncertainty about the consequences of the regional instability for the IS buildup.

An air strike without a ground operation could at most disrupt operations by Islamic State forces, but no more. In order to win the battle, actors in the region should be persuaded to send ground troops for the fighting. However, if coalition troops are not reinforced, and especially if Turkey does not participate actively in the ground fighting, there is little chance that Arab countries will send their own troops. In its strategic vision, Iran has taken advantage of the hesitation of Arab countries and the West and established armed Shiite militias that are the "boots on the ground," thus forming a network of Shiites outposts and armed services across the region for when the time comes that will serve its interests.

Syria, unlike Iraq, is still perceived as outside the pale for most Western countries, and they are making do with air strikes there and starting an effort to recruit and train troops from among moderate opposition forces and minorities. Although Turkey is affected by events in Syria and is influencing developments there, it is also a member of the group that refuses to intervene on the ground because it fears responsibility for the bloodshed in Syria. Therefore, Arab states are participating mainly in aerial attacks against Islamic State targets in Syria. Their active contribution stems from their fear that the war will spill over to their territory and their interests in the region will be affected.

And if all this is not enough, coalition fighting against Islamic State helps the Assad regime because it means that direct pressure on the regime is relaxed. In addition, as long as the United States is focused on the fighting in Iraq, there is growing tension between it and its monarchy allies in the Middle East, who are troubled by the commonality of interests between the United States and Iran, reflected in the struggle underway in Iraq. At the same time, it appears that Assad himself is not interested in defeating Islamic State because this would leave his regime at center stage as the common enemy of most Middle East countries and in the international community. On the other hand, as long as Assad rules in Syria, it will not be possible to stop and suppress the recruitment of volunteers and the Salafist jihadi groups joining with Islamic State forces to fight the regime. Therefore, in order to neutralize the strategic balance created between the sides, there is a need to work to defeat Islamic State and at the same time build a pragmatic and relevant alternative to the Assad regime in Syria.

For its part, Iran is no longer concealing its military activity (mainly through the Quds Force) in Iraq, Syria (including the Golan Heights), and Lebanon. It is determined to exploit the instability and the fact that Islamic State has been marked as the major threat to the West in order to promote its hegemony in the region, using Shiite militias and proxies that it is building and planting across the region. In the context of the massive campaign meant to glorify Iran as the savior of Iraq, Tehran is publishing heroic images of Quds Force commander Qasem Suleimani organizing the Shiite forces and Kurdish militias for war in Iraq. This move has great significance for the matrix of loyalties and strategic alliances that will be created in the Middle East on the "day after." The danger here is that the public in Iraq, as well as the Kurds, will be grateful to Iran, which helped them survive the Islamic State onslaught.

The uncertainty and the fog surrounding the Middle East appear to be heavier than in previous decades. The current reality, centered on the battle against Islamic State, is not simple for decision makers around the world. Nevertheless, the sharpened tensions and the increased violence between the various actors in the region could actually bring the international community closer to the point at which it would have to decide how it wishes to cope with the challenges in the region. The United States, despite the perceived decline in its power and status, is still the leading and most powerful world power. The difficult questions resulting from the challenge of Islamic State's rise and the challenge inherent in the Iranian nuclear issue are the problems of the US administration. The United States must adopt a decisive policy in order to strengthen the coalition it is leading and increase the determination of its allies to defeat Islamic State, while continuing the effort to reach an agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue that will not be perceived as capitulation to Iran's nuclear wishes if Iran cooperates in the fight against the Islamic State.

Implications for the Future

The turmoil in the Middle East has created much uncertainty about the future. Governments and leaders do not know if they will survive the crisis, who their neighbors will be, and how the borders will be drawn. Even in countries whose stability has not yet been affected by the crisis, there is a fear that

internal crises will develop in the future or that the turmoil in neighboring countries will spill over into their territory as well. In these conditions, governments find it difficult to plan their moves and take decisions for the long term that will be affected by the situation in the region.

The end of the crisis is not yet in sight, and it may well continue for many years. In at least four states in the region, including Iraq and Syria, the situation has deteriorated in the past year, and conditions have not yet been created that would lead to their stabilization. With a basis for agreement on a political settlement in Syria and Iraq lacking; with a violent struggle between Shiites and Sunnis, and Kurds and other ethnic groups that seek independence; with jihadi terrorist organizations and armed militias gaining power and operating not only in Iraq and Syria but also in Egypt; with fighting between tribes in Yemen and Libya; with no major actor in the region that can lead the Arab world to stability; and with Iran acting provocatively in various countries, there is little chance that the crisis will end soon.

The surprising appearance of Islamic State has exacerbated the situation. It is one of the most threatening terrorist organizations ever because it controls a broad swath if territory in the heart of the Middle East and because its successes on the ground have brought it large financial resources and a stream of volunteers from the Middle East and beyond who have been captivated by its vision. The international effort to stop the organization, led by the United States, is in its infancy, and has not yet had significant success. The US administration estimates it will take three years to stop and destroy Islamic State, but this may be too low an estimate. Air strikes, which have been the focus of the US response until now, are perhaps painful for Islamic State, but it is doubtful that by themselves they will achieve the goal. In any case, stopping Islamic State will also require a combination of vigorous parallel political, economic, and social efforts in order to isolate the organization and separate it from its Sunni support base. Achieving this goal will require considerable time, a change in approach to the Sunni leadership in Iraq, and presentation of a practicable new horizon for the Sunni population in Syria. Ultimately, Islamic State's weaknesses could lead to a reduction in its power. However, this will be a lengthy effort, and the organization will probably not disappear completely.

The increasing number of failed states in the Middle East has led to assessments concerning the collapse of the Sykes-Picot arrangements, which were made nearly a century ago and set the borders of the countries in the heart of the region. The possibility that the arrangements would collapse arose a decade ago, especially concerning Iraq, which appeared to be disintegrating after the Kurds succeeded in establishing an autonomous region in northern Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, and when it became clear that the Shiites and Sunnis were unable to achieve national reconciliation that would allow them to live side by side. The possible redrafting of borders, however, itself poses serious difficulties, including the different ethnic populations mixed together, the difficulties in dividing economic assets, the obstacles to the building of military forces and the disbanding of armed ethnic militias, and a large measure of hatred and mutual suspicion. As a result, no real measures have been taken thus far in Iraq or Syria to divide the countries, and it is doubtful whether the opposing parties will pursue this goal in the near future. The main viable possibility is the translation of the Kurdish autonomous region into an independent entity, but this too is encountering difficulties and opposition within Iraq and from its neighbors, and thus there is unlikely to be rapid progress in this direction.

Israel is by no means disconnected from the crisis in the region. The fact that many Arab countries are preoccupied with their internal problems is convenient for Israel. The weakness of Iraq and Syria has brought benefits to Israel, since Iraq's military capabilities have disappeared, and the little that is left of them does not threaten Israel. The Syrian army's capabilities have also been seriously damaged. The deterioration of security in the Sinai Peninsula since the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood regime and the el-Sisi government's rise to power has led to improved security coordination between Israel and Egypt and contributed to reinforcing the stability of peaceful relations between them. Moreover, defense ties between Israel and Jordan have grown stronger because the royal house has realized that Israel is the only country that would come to Jordan's aid if it faced a real external threat.

In this context, the question arises as to how the situation in Syria and the survival of the Assad regime affect Israel's security and interests. Israel is not involved in the internal struggle in Syria. It has no interest in intervening,

beyond preventing spillover into Israeli territory and stopping the transfer of high quality weapons from Syria to Hizbollah. Israel has succeeded in building significant deterrent capability against Syria, at least with regard to the Golan Heights border, and for years, Syria has refrained from provoking Israel from this border and responding to Israeli attacks on Syrian targets. However, the situation that has developed in Syria since 2011 has created dangers for Israel, primarily because the internal struggle in Syria that occasionally – intentionally or accidentally – spills over into Israel could deteriorate. This situation is undesirable for Israel because various organizations operating in Syria, including Hizbollah, provoke it from time to time, and there is no responsible party through which Israel can deter them from continuing the provocations. Israel's attack on a group of Hizbollah fighters and Iranian army personnel in the Quneitra area in late January 2015 – following an attempt by Hizbollah and Iran to build a terror infrastructure in the Golan Heights – provided an opening to expand the conflict between Israel and Hizbollah, and perhaps even Iran.

Furthermore, the rise of Islamic State and other jihadi organizations creates dangers for Israel in the longer run because they view Israel as an enemy and a key target that must be confronted. At the present time, they consider the confrontation with Israel to be of low priority while their attention is focused on the difficult struggle against international and local forces. Later, however, if and when they are able to divert attention from this struggle, they could attempt to strike at Israel, directly or indirectly. Such an attack could take place by means of terror efforts against Israeli targets from Syria, Lebanon, or Sinai, against Jewish targets around the world, or attempts to infiltrate the Palestinian arena or undermine the stability of the regime in Jordan – whose survival is a strategic interest of Israel. At the same time, the threat that Islamic State poses to countries in the region could also create opportunities to strengthen cooperation between Israel and moderate Arab states to stop Iran and jihadi organizations, and this could be a basis for improving relations in other areas such as the economy, water, and technology.