

## EXPERT VIEW

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## Navigating the Arab Storm Three Years On

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## KEY POINTS

- The Arab uprisings that began in December 2010 have triggered a series of dramatic and destabilising political processes within states that are having profound effects for the regional state system, many of which have not been fully appreciated in the West. The key processes include:
  - the Arab street emerging as a key political actor, albeit facing continuous repression by stronger forces;
  - state frameworks significantly weakening due to societal, generational, ethnic, sectarian (especially Sunni-Shia), religious and tribal schisms, coupled with economic crises;
  - political Islam seeking and gaining state power but facing failures and dramatic reversals;
  - Jihadists taking advantage of chaos across the region and turning Syria into the primary global jihadi centre;
  - status quo forces pushing back to maintain stability;
  - liberal democratic forces marginalised in the turmoil;
  - human catastrophe and population movements (especially in Syria);
- The key effects for the regional system include:
  - dynamics increasingly shaped by Sunni-Shia rivalry (with Iran and Saudi Arabia the leading protagonists) – felt most potently in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain – but with Sunni states at odds over relations with both Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood;
  - increased perception of weakness or irrelevance of the US and its allies, including Britain, with significant consequences for the calculations of regional players;
  - these factors combining in the Syrian context to create a conflict driven by Iranian backed radical Shia and Alawite forces on the one hand, and Sunni Jihadists on the other, both of which are bad options for the West.
- From Israel's perspective the situation presents both opportunities and threats:
  - Significant threats to Israel's security have been weakened – especially Syria and Hezbollah as part of the Iranian-led radical axis, and Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood representing Sunni Islamism. This lowers the chances of a major military conflict.
  - The dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons reduces another major threat.
  - Western aligned regional actors are reaching out to Israel as its significance as a partner to important Sunni forces in Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf increases.
  - Israel is positioning itself as a regional trade conduit between Europe and the Gulf in place of Syria, as a reliable source of gas, and as potential, partial alternative trade route to the Suez Canal.
  - However, the weakening and failure of states creates opportunities for non-state actors to upgrade their arsenals, and for global Jihadist groups to threaten Israel's borders, especially from the Sinai Peninsula and Syria.
  - The wide perception of US weakness and in particular the US stance towards Iran is a major source of concern.
  - The weakening of regional spoilers may improve conditions for Israeli-Palestinian peace, but failure to make progress may trigger political confrontation and Palestinian unrest.
- To promote the interests of Israel, moderate Arab states and the West, the UK and other Western powers must be pragmatic, flexible but proactive in each arena. They should:
  - be wary of Iran's regional ambitions;
  - back moderates in Syria, prioritise the humanitarian catastrophe, and contain the spill over;
  - prioritise stability in Egypt;
  - promote Palestinian institution-building and economy alongside the diplomatic track, and discourage Palestinian alternatives to a negotiated agreement.

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE ARAB SPRING?

"Who killed the Arab Spring?" wondered Ghassan Charbel, the editor-in-chief of the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* in a recent article.<sup>1</sup> "Where are the youth who, some three years ago, gathered in public squares and open spaces demanding that those they referred to as tyrants or dictators or despots should go? ... Do they remember the dreams they allowed themselves to believe in at the time and their talk of democracy, an institution-governed state, transparency, the peaceful transfer of power, and respect for human rights?"

Three years on, the pictures of mass popular protest in quest of all these basic human desires are gone, and with them the high hopes of a swift historic transition towards democracy and liberalism. They have given way to scenes of war, violence, human tragedy, repression and deprivation. Will this messy and bloody process ultimately lead to more pluralistic, liberal, inclusive and tolerant societies or merely replace one set of autocratic systems with another? How long will it take and at what cost? How will it impact the regional balance of power? What will be Israel's role in a changing region? And how can the US and European powers best advance stability and contain anti-Western forces?

## PART I: MAIN PROCESSES OF CHANGE

### The interrupted rise of the Arab street

The mass, mostly peaceful, protest of the "Arab street" that started the regional eruption, carried to a large extent by young people using social networks, was quickly shoved aside by stronger forces. But with the genie out of the bottle it has the potential to express itself again over time, especially given the generational gap exposed by the upheaval. This was the case in Egypt when millions took to the streets in 2013 against the Muslim Brotherhood government, believing that it was prioritising its own ideology over the national interest. This latent voice also impacts, to varying degrees, the processes of forming or updating constitutions taking place in a number of Arab states.

<sup>1</sup> Ghassan Charbel, "Who killed the Arab Spring?" *Al-Hayat (Lebanon)*, December 17, 2013 (translation by the Mideast Mirror).

### Weakening state frameworks

The popular wave severely cracked the old order, opening the door for other more organised forces, mostly Islamist and sectarian in character. The result in a series of Arab states was the implosion of the traditional autocratic state framework, and subsequent collapse into weak, failed, dysfunctional or fractured entities.

The end of the old order ultimately pitted various forces against each other: change-seekers versus status quo forces; Islamists versus secularists; Sunnis against Shiites. These tensions, mostly within Islam, are polarising, destabilising and in some cases tearing apart countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain. In this process, religious, sectarian, ethnic and tribal loyalties increasingly trump loyalty to the national state framework, badly shaking post-World-War I colonial arrangements.

One of the most serious and violent schisms has developed between **Sunnis and Shiites**. In the broader regional context these weakening states are venues to express the rivalry between Shiite Iran and its proxies and major Sunni powers, most notably Saudi Arabia.

The most devastating collapse into sectarianisation and ethnic conflict has been in **Syria**. While Syria is drawing in many thousands of Sunni Jihadist fighters,<sup>2</sup> including from Europe, to fight the Assad regime, Iran has been recruiting Shiite forces to actively fight for their allies, the Syrian Alawites (a distant offshoot of Shiism). These forces include Iranian Revolutionary Guards, thousands of Hezbollah combatants, and Iraqi Shiites. Both sides frame the war in religious terms.

Yet another manifestation of the collapse of the old state order can be found in the development of a semi-autonomous **Kurdish entity** in northern Syria, with its own administration, political parties, armed militia and distinct emblems. Adding to the existing Kurdish entity in northern Iraq, this raises the prospects for Kurdish national aspirations.

<sup>2</sup> Israel's Director of Military Intelligence recently put the overall number of [self-identified] Jihadists in Syria around 30,000. Of these, Western intelligence communities estimate the number of Al-Qaeda affiliated groups (organisationally or ideologically) at around 10,000.

### The rise and fall of political Islam

Islamist parties, using their organisational prowess and popular appeal, proved able to hijack the revolution and gain power through elections in Egypt and Tunisia, and to increase their strength and profile elsewhere. However, Islamist parties failed in power and quickly lost the aura of clean political actors capable of delivering effective governance.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was forcibly ousted (and subsequently outlawed) by the military, acting on a wave of popular protest. Meanwhile in Tunisia, the An-Nahda party stepped down in the face of internal disorder and public pressure, marking the first time an Islamist party has given up power voluntarily.<sup>3</sup> In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood contributed to its own weakening by boycotting elections and allowing the emergence of a competing, mainstream, moderate Islamist party. And in Gaza, which was taken over by Hamas years before the Arab Spring, the government is experiencing an all-time low. It has lost state backing from Egypt (whose current regime regards Hamas as an enemy and designated it a terrorist organisation) and Syria, and faced a major rift with Iran that is only recently being healed.<sup>4</sup> It is also paying for its own policy mistakes, such as meddling in Egypt and appearing adverse to Palestinian national unity.

Political and financial support that Islamist parties have enjoyed from Qatar and Turkey is also under pressure. Both were disheartened by the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which denied them easy access to Hamas-ruled Gaza. Qatar's support for Muslim Brotherhood elements in the region<sup>5</sup>, continued under its newly-crowned Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, moved four Arab status quo forces – Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt – to recently withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar. At the same time Turkey's hopes of becoming a dominant regional actor, and of offering it a model for reconciling Islam with democracy and economic

<sup>3</sup> Tunisia presents an interesting and unusual case in that Islamist groups have been more inclusive, and engaged in a process that produced the most liberal constitution in the Arab world.

<sup>4</sup> Having totally lost Egypt, Hamas has turned back to Iran, and they are on the way to fully recovering their relations and re-establishing the old axis.

<sup>5</sup> Qatar's support is mainly through funding, promotion through Al Jazeera, and providing a base and platform for Sheikh Yussuf Al Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

success, have been set back by an unprecedented domestic crisis, and by the AKP's increasingly illiberal treatment of the media, judiciary and military.

Mainstream Islamist parties are challenged not only by regime and secular forces but also by Salafi fundamentalist movements, some of whom have joined the political field. Paradoxically, Egypt's Salafi Nour party has cooperated with the regime in formulating a new constitution while the Muslim Brotherhood boycotted it.

Under the severe pressure of the Egyptian regime, the Brotherhood may ultimately split between those on the margins who seek rapprochement with the government, an extreme minority who may join armed Jihadists<sup>6</sup> and the remaining bulk who may return to being an extra-parliamentary opposition, including through mass popular protests.

Islamist parties will continue to play an important role in Arab politics, but the experience of the past few years shows that they are ultimately an ideological minority, albeit a strong and important one, and that Arab societies prefer good governance over ideology. Nonetheless, the sharp tension between Islamists and non-Islamists will continue to be a key divide in a number of Arab states, not least in Egypt.

### The resurgence of Jihadists

The eruption of revolutionary energies and the weakening of central state authorities has also enabled the resurgence of extreme Al-Qaeda-like Salafi-Jihadi groups; in north Africa, Egypt, Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, the Gulf, and above all in Syria. Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) have become the most potent forces in the rebellion, taking over parts of north east Syria and enforcing Sharia law there. Moreover, as was noted, Syria is drawing in thousands of Jihadists from all over the Arab and Muslim world, as well as hundreds of Muslims from the West. As happened following Jihadist struggles against both the Soviets and the US in Afghanistan, when these people go back to their countries they could create havoc.

<sup>6</sup> There is a historic precedent: the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood spawned the Islamic Jihad movement under the leadership of Ayman Zawahiri. The movement assassinated Egypt's President Anwar Sadat in 1981 and later joined what came to be Al-Qaeda.

### Status quo forces pushing back but vulnerable

It took a while for the forces favouring the old order to adjust and push back. Egypt is a unique example because of the role played by the military. Like the Turkish military during decades of Kemalism, the Egyptian military posited itself during the Arab Spring as the guardian of the national interest and thus played a key role in the ouster of both President Mubarak and then President Morsi. With General Sisi at the helm, Egypt is again being effectively and autocratically run by the military establishment (behind a veneer of a civilian government). However, the experience of recent years and the internal tensions between the military, Islamists and liberal secularists, point to a long period of instability.

Meanwhile, the Arab Kings and Sheikhs continue to weather the storm quite successfully. They maintain a deeper level of legitimacy due to their lineage and historic connection to the holy shrines of Islam, and have used other tools ably to manage public dissent. King Muhammad VI of Morocco smartly managed a process of reform ahead of the regional curve; King Abdullah of Jordan employed an effective carrot and stick policy, skilfully building on his image as guarantor of domestic stability; whilst Gulf monarchies used their financial resources to buy quiet at home. Bahrain is the exception, mostly because it is torn between a 75 per cent Shiite majority and the ruling Sunni minority.

However, monarchies are not immune to change. Several Gulf states are already experiencing the emergence of organised youth activism emboldened by the Arab Spring, challenging the conservative political culture and traditional social norms.<sup>7</sup> Noteworthy is the simmering unrest beneath the surface in Saudi Arabia. Young Saudis are open to outside influences and are heavy users of social networks. Over 90 per cent of Saudis aged 18-24 use the internet, Saudi Arabia has the fastest growing market for YouTube, and has the highest rate of Twitter use among internet users anywhere in the world. Within the kingdom there are ongoing tensions in the oil rich eastern province, which hosts the country's 10-15 per cent Shiite minority.

<sup>7</sup> Kristin Diwan, "Breaking Taboos: Youth Activism in the Gulf states," *Atlantic Council*, March 2014.

Jordan's stability remains threatened with internal challenges exacerbated by regional events. According to official Jordanian figures, the influx of Syrians to Jordan amounts to 1.3 million (some 600,000 of whom are registered as refugees) – a heavy burden on the economy, infrastructure and social fabric of a country of 6.2 million. The loss of reliable cheap Egyptian energy coming through the Sinai, and the loss of its main external trade conduit in Syria, are additional major challenges. Additionally, Jordanians are dominant in the ranks of Jihadists in Syria and may later stir instability at home.

### Humanitarian catastrophe and demographic upheavals

The war in Syria has turned into an enormous humanitarian catastrophe. Beyond the estimated 140,000 fatalities, the war has displaced nearly one in three Syrian citizens, with 2.5 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and well over 4 million internally displaced.<sup>8</sup> Disease is everywhere. The refugee problem carries a high risk of destabilising neighbouring countries, especially Jordan and Lebanon. The latter hosts nearly 25 per cent of its own small population, adding to the acute internal sectarian tension exacerbated by the war.

The rise of Islamic forces and sectarian conflicts have also adversely affected **Christian communities**. This phenomenon did not start with the Arab Spring but was significantly accelerated by it. Once flourishing Christian communities have shrunk dramatically in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Even in Bethlehem, traditionally the Palestinian Christian 'capital', Christians were reduced from 90 per cent of the population to about one third, even though the Palestinian Authority did not experience a 'Palestinian Spring.'

## PART II: THE REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER AND THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS

### Shia-Sunni rivalry

The pre-Arab-Spring rivalry between the Iranian-led radical 'axis of resistance' and the Western-oriented

<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that there are 800,000-1.2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, 700,000-900,000 in Turkey, over 600,000 in Jordan and 250,000 in Iraq. There are also well over 100,000 in Egypt.

Arab camp dominated by Egypt, has transformed to a more sectarian rivalry between Iran and its Shiite proxies and the major Sunni powers, first among them Saudi Arabia. This is perhaps the most significant issue defining regional politics today. The Arab Spring, the turmoil in Egypt and the perception of American weakness all pushed Saudi Arabia away from its traditional, low-profile regional role. It has become active in support of Sunni elements in Syria fighting Assad, in Lebanon countering Hezbollah<sup>9</sup> and in Iraq. It has also gone out of its way to support other monarchies and status-quo forces – sending forces to Bahrain in 2011 to help quell Shiite unrest and injecting billions of dollars to aid the post-Morsi Egyptian government and the Jordanian monarchy.

Driven by this rivalry, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers (such as Turkey) turned a blind eye to the build-up of jihadi forces in Syria. Coupled with Western passivity this has enabled the war to develop mostly between the Iranian-led radical axis and global Jihadi elements – both bad news for the West and its regional allies. This process has marginalised more liberal elements in the Syrian opposition and semi-legitimised Assad and Iran as would-be partners to a diplomatic solution. Faced with an emerging choice between two evils in Syria – Assad and the Jihadists – regional actors are reconsidering their policies. Turkey has become careful about freely allowing jihadists to cross the border to Syria, Saudi Arabia recently criminalised joining Jihadi ranks in Syria, and Kuwait and Jordan are mulling similar legislation.

The victory of Hassan Rouhani in the Iranian presidential elections signalled that the Iranian public also wants change, including the lifting of international sanctions, openness to the West and more liberalisation at home. Nevertheless, while Rouhani's election opened the way to negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, he has not so far made any change in Iran's regional behaviour in Syria or elsewhere, and is unlikely to. Indeed, the international legitimacy bestowed on Iran by the nuclear negotiations will likely afford Iran more room to further pursue its hegemonic and destabilising regional policies.

<sup>9</sup> In this context, Saudi Arabia recently agreed to fund a \$3 billion deal to arm the Lebanese army with French arms.

Regional actors are reacting accordingly to the nuclear talks between Iran and the international community. While Saudi Arabia is concerned lest it ultimately face a nuclear capable Iran with regional hegemonic ambitions, others, including some of Riyadh's Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners, seek to make gains by positioning themselves as a possible bridge between Iran and the West. Qatar and Turkey have traditionally played this role, but Oman has also got involved – to the dissatisfaction of the Saudis – by facilitating the US-Iran backchannel which enabled the recent interim nuclear agreement.

In addition to the serious differences over the Muslim Brotherhood, these varying approaches to Iran signify a major rift within the GCC. Following the interim Iranian nuclear agreement, more regional actors look to benefit from the expected lifting of sanctions on Iran, and Turkey in particular is one to watch.

### **Perceived US weakness**

Another key regional development with major ramifications is the growing regional perception – shared by friends and foes alike – of American weakness and desire to retreat from the Middle East. Several factors account for this perception:

- a. External powers have overall shown limited influence over the course of regional events in the last three years. Western military intervention did play a crucial role in toppling Muammar Gadhafi's regime in Libya, but there seems to be no will left to intervene anywhere anymore. Regarding both Syria and Iran, the focus for the West, under US leadership, has shifted to containing weapons of mass destruction through diplomatic efforts, whilst relegating their other dangerous policies to a lower priority.
- b. The US is widely regarded as war-weary after Iraq and Afghanistan (and to a lesser extent Libya), challenged by an acute economic crisis but about to become energy independent, and inclined to shift attention away from the Middle East, be it to "nation building at home" or on pivoting to the Asia-Pacific theatre.

- c. In the eyes of many in the region, the US has shown insufficient resolve to stand up to the radical (predominantly Shiite) Iranian-led axis in the region:

First, the US decision to refrain from arming the moderate rebel camp in Syria – having called for Assad to step down – while Iran and Russia actively support the Syrian leader, are interpreted as having strengthened Assad's hands and radicalised the conflict by empowering Jihadi groups.

Second, while the deal to dismantle Syrian chemical capabilities is positive, the route to achieving it appeared to many in the region as strewn with hesitancy and weakness – shying away from enforcing an explicit US presidential red line and allowing Russia to step in, provide an exit and cash in politically. Furthermore, the deal allows Assad to continue his brutal methods as long as he does not use chemical weapons.

Third, against this very background, the deal with Iran regarding its nuclear capabilities is considered regionally as yet another reflection of Western weakness and avoidance of a showdown. It is not the very act of diplomacy that is questioned – Israelis and Saudis would prefer a good diplomatic deal to war – it is the level of Western resolve to force a reasonable deal, including through backing diplomacy with a credible military option.

- d. The US handling of events in Egypt also contributed to this negative image. Saudis, anti-Islamist Egyptians and other regional status-quo forces all express concern over what they see as US betrayal of a long-term ally (Mubarak) and as betting on Islamists despite their inherent anti-Western attitudes.

The conclusion drawn is that the US defines its core interests in relatively narrow terms of non-proliferation of non-conventional capabilities and of protecting the free flow of energy (for the time being). This comes at the expense of maintaining the stability of allied regimes in the face of Iran or Islamist forces (which is most important to status

quo forces), actively advancing democracy and human rights (most important to liberal forces and oppressed groups), averting humanitarian crises, and reliably standing by its allies. While there is no doubt that all these are valued by the US, regional actors no longer view them as core Western interests and believe they will ultimately be left alone to deal with the broader consequences of facing emboldened Iranian and Syrian regimes.

This widely held perception has unfortunately become the buzz of regional discourse. Right or wrong, it impacts not only what regional actors say but what they do. It is no coincidence that Egypt is discussing a huge arms deal with Russia possibly funded by the Saudis, that Turkey announced its preference for a Chinese missile defence system not interoperable with NATO radars on its soil, and that Saudi Arabia has warmed defence ties with France. These actors do not have real alternatives to the US and are not on the verge of reorienting themselves, yet these signs reflect deep frustration with the US. Regional actors are also carefully watching the US reaction to other international challenges, such as the Russian aggression in the Ukraine.

### **PART III: IMPLICATIONS FOR ISRAEL**

Israel has found itself in a highly unstable environment fraught with a high degree of uncertainty, and surrounded by failed, dysfunctional and polarised states and mostly hostile non-state actors. This unique setting carries a mixed bag of risks and opportunities.

The list of benefits includes: weakening some of Israel's worst enemies such as Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas; putting tremendous pressure on the Iranian-led radical axis; toppling the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and weakening them elsewhere; diminishing the threat of a conventional war with a neighbouring military for years to come; and initiating the removal of Syria's huge chemical stockpile.

Israel also benefits by quietly positioning itself as an alternative regional trade conduit, in place of pre-war Syria. Trade between Europe and the Gulf is already passing through Israel with an average 100 Turkish trucks a week arriving via sea and passing through Israel to Jordan and back. Israel is planning a

commercial railway from its Mediterranean coast to the ports of Eilat and Aqaba, offering the potential for a faster, cheaper and safer partial alternative to the Suez Canal, which is now under threat from Jihadists in the Sinai.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Israel is considering providing cheap natural gas (from Israel's off-shore fields in the Mediterranean) to neighbouring countries and thereby stabilising, normalising and deepening relations with them. Initial commercial gas deals were recently struck with Jordanian and Palestinian companies, and deals with Egypt and Turkey are also under consideration.

On the other hand, the turmoil is empowering non-state actors hostile to Israel, who might put their hands on strategic weapons now abundant in the region, especially following wars in Libya and Syria. Jihadist groups are within reach of such weapons and Israeli intelligence estimates that Hezbollah, already with an arsenal of some 100,000 projectiles, eyes Syrian and Iranian strategic capabilities which could serve as game changers against Israel. According to media reports, Israel has carried out a series of airstrikes targeting convoys of such strategic weapons destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon. In early March 2014 it intercepted a ship carrying heavy rockets, sent from Iran to armed groups in Gaza. These non-state actors may also destabilise Israel's borders. Jihadists have been responsible for most cross-border attacks along Israel's borders with Egypt, Gaza and Lebanon in the last three years, and they are entrenching themselves on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, close to the Israeli border. In the Israeli defence establishment, the working assumption is that nearly 40 years of quiet along this border will end sooner or later.

The regional perception of US weakness adds to the negative side in Israel's calculus. This is especially true with regards to the future of Iran's nuclear program, which for Israel will determine its strategic position more than anything else. Given question marks over Western resolve, Israelis are concerned lest the current diplomatic effort lead to open ended

<sup>10</sup> Not much attention was given to the fact that in late August 2013 an armed Jihadi group fired a rocket at a Chinese cargo ship traversing the Suez Canal, slightly damaging it. The group publicly threatened to continue attacking foreign vessels in the Canal. On February 26, 2014 an Egyptian court sentenced 26 people (tried in absentia) to death for founding a "terror group" aiming to attack ships in the Suez Canal.

talks, a semi-permanent interim deal, or a bad deal – any of which may allow Iran to establish itself as a nuclear threshold state.

A positive side effect of perceived US weakness is that regional actors with similar concerns are quietly reaching out to Israel. Below the radar, Israeli and Egyptian militaries coordinate closely regarding the Israel-Egypt-Gaza border. Meanwhile, Israel has an extensive dialogue with Jordan, and a developing one with some Gulf states. Unresolved yet are the relations with Turkey, despite Israel's apology for the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident and converging interests over Syria.

When it comes to the Palestinian question, the Arab Spring highlighted the fact that whilst the Israeli-Palestinian conflict carries emotional weight, and is therefore used as a political weapon by regional actors, it is not the epicentre of the region. Regional actors preoccupied with domestic or regional turmoil are unable to back negotiations with effective collective support or a regional security architecture. However, their distraction, as well as the weakening of spoilers (such as Hamas), actually affords Israelis and Palestinians more room to negotiate with less external pressure, and it underlines some converging Israeli-Palestinian interests in a volatile region. However, Israel has to take into considerations that if current talks fail it may face a new outburst of Palestinian hostility on the ground – perhaps a Palestinian version of the Arab Spring utilising mass 'popular resistance' – alongside a political and legal campaign to delegitimise Israel.

## CONCLUSION

It was unrealistic to expect, as some did, that a new, more liberal order, would be swiftly built on the ruins of the old. Not only is such a giant leap forward impossible in societies lacking a culture of democracy, pluralism and liberalism, but it cannot be built while state frameworks are being torn apart by internal strife, and while the more liberal forces – the prerequisite engine of change – are still weak, fragmented, disorganised and marginalised by stronger illiberal forces. Under such circumstances transition is necessarily a long-term, perhaps generational process, and it remains to be seen where the Arab Spring will lead.



Facing such an unpredictable and diverse environment, the US and its major European partners have to define their priorities among the central guiding principles informing their policies: non-proliferation, stability, free flow of energy, democracy and human rights, humanitarian concerns, loyalty to friends and allies and the stability of peace agreements and regional relationships with Israel. Given the circumstances analysed above, it appears that each of the major regional challenges requires a different priority.

### **Iran: engage with eyes open and address regional concerns**

While rightly prioritising nuclear non-proliferation regarding Iran, the West should be mindful of the potential impact of a possible nuclear deal, or prolonged interim reality, on the broader regional context. First, it should be clear that allowing Iran to be a threshold nuclear state, rather than significantly rolling back its nuclear capabilities, will have a very negative long-term impact, shifting the balance of power in Iran's favour at the expense of Western allies and interests. Second, there should be no illusion that a nuclear deal signifies Iranian policy re-orientation and abandonment of its hegemonic ambitions, or an opening to a broad detente between Iran and the West. Third, converging interests with Iran against the resurgence of Sunni Jihadists, must not blind the West to conclude that Iran could be a reliable partner to stabilising the region, in Syria or elsewhere.

As the West implements the interim deal and negotiates a permanent one, it should not only insist on significantly rolling Iran's capabilities back from the threshold, but also closely cooperate with pro-Western forces to counter Iranian destabilising policies. These include fuelling the war in Syria, arming Hezbollah and other extreme regional elements, and initiating and supporting violent and subversive activities across the region.

### **Syria: back moderates, prioritise humanitarian crisis and contain spill over**

Likewise in Syria, the West should not be tempted by the emergence of Jihadists to legitimise the Assad regime, and the radical Shiite axis which backs it,

and to cooperate with it except as concerns the removal of chemical weapons. Both this axis and Sunni Jihadists are inherently anti-Western and anti-democratic. Since fighting could go on for a very long time and diplomacy stands a very slim chance of removing Assad voluntarily, priority should be given to the grave humanitarian crisis and to strengthening the more moderate opposition. This should include broadening its base, enhancing its governance capacity in areas of Syria where it has control and arming and supporting carefully vetted rebel elements, including with capabilities to neutralise Assad's air advantage.

The West should also do its utmost to support countries whose stability is threatened by the war, due to the burden of refugees and pressure on their economies. While the US signalled the direction by recently enhancing assistance to Jordan, this essential pro-western actor requires even greater support. Given the magnitude and severity of the growing refugee problem, it may be time to consider establishing humanitarian zones on the Syrian side of the borders with Jordan and Turkey and enforcing them with active Arab and Turkish support.

### **The Jihadist threat: develop regional responses**

While countering the radical Shiite axis in Syria, the West would do well to develop and encourage regional frameworks for countering the challenge posed by Sunni Jihadists in such fields as intelligence sharing, operational cooperation and moderate Islamic education, as well as for economic and social development. Major Sunni powers should be engaged in this effort and Israel could also contribute indirectly and behind the scenes.

### **Egypt: prioritise stability**

In Egypt, at this phase, stability should be prioritised. It is not in the West's interest that such an important actor collapse economically or be chronically destabilised. The task of averting such an outcome should not be left solely to the Gulf States. Security wise, Western actors should support Egypt's efforts to re-assume control in the Sinai in the face of Jihadists (e.g. by releasing to Egypt US Apache attack helicopters) and to maintain security coordination

with Israel to stabilise the border and contain extremists.

This does not mean giving up on the important wish to promote democracy and human rights; they should be upheld and strongly encouraged both publicly and privately. However, leveraging Western support and influence in order to promote these important values should be used carefully and defined by incremental, realistic goals. While rightly protesting against the violent suppression of opposition in Egypt, the US and Europe should be clear eyed that the Islamist alternative is no more democratic, but rather inherently anti-Western and less committed to the peace agreement with Israel. There must be support for transition towards democratic and liberal values and institutions, in Egypt and elsewhere, yet it ought to be done with a long-term view.

#### **Israeli-Palestinian arena: encourage Palestinian bottom-up development alongside top-down talks**

In this stormy region Israel stands out as an island of stability. However Israeli-Palestinian talks are reaching a pivotal stage, and their collapse could present a strategic challenge to Israel. Britain and other EU states should do all they can to support the US led Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The EU has hinted at the negative consequences for Israel if the diplomacy fails, but it is important that Europe avoids giving any incentive to the Palestinians to bring about the collapse of the process. In particular, EU states should firmly discourage the Palestinians from resuming efforts to secure recognition in international forums and to re-launch an anti-Israel political-legal international campaign as an alternative to an agreement with Israel. If President

Abbas feels he will receive broad international support in unilateral measures, especially from Europe, his incentive to engage constructively with US brokered bilateral talks will be diminished.

In addition, Europe should use the timeframe for negotiations to support Palestinian bottom-up institution-building (along the lines designed by previous prime minister Salam Fayyad) and hasten efforts to stabilise and upgrade the Palestinian economy.

#### **The bottom line**

Evidently, the West has less influence over the events in the Middle East than before the Arab Spring. However, the West still holds significant cards, especially when it comes to Iran, and its role is still indispensable and cannot be substituted by other global forces. Checking out on its responsibilities will only foster further instability, which may well exceed the confines of the region.

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Cover Photo: An Egyptian girl holds a portrait of Egypt's Defense Minister Abdelfatah el-Sisi, leaning against a barbed wired fence in Tahrir Square in Cairo on 19 July 2013. Photo by Wissam Nassar/FLASH90.