Changing Regional Order

Strategic Shifts in the Mediterranean after the Arab Spring: Drivers and Scenarios for the Region

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The fifth year after the Arab Spring is witnessing a cooling down of the wave of enthusiasm for what was expected to be the fourth global wave of democratisation. Not only have the voices calling for democracy, social justice and development withered away, but also there are new factors reshaping the regional landscape: deep internal changes in the roles of governments, parties, non-state actors and peoples, together with new regional competitions.

It is possible to identify four dynamic processes (or cycles) driving and shaping the current strategic landscape of the south and eastern Mediterranean.

— First, the regression of state omnipresence due to a combination of factors, including failed governance, popular demands for change and the rising role of non-state actors.
— Second, the competition between forces of chaos and order, not only internally but also regionally as people, ideas and threats seep across borders.
— Third, changes in the regional order related to system membership, the hierarchy of power, role of outside actors, etc.
— Fourth, deeper systemic forces, including population increase, urbanisation, education and media penetration.

Withering Role of the State

As they developed after World War II, the position of the State in the Arab regional system showed resilience, with a capacity to monopolise power, distribute rewards and services and resist challenges from above (claims for Arab or pan-Islamic unity, global cold war competition) and from below (non-state actors, competing ethnic identities, sectarianism, economic and social structures). Yes, the performance of the State was below par on a whole range of issues: democratisation, economic development, quality of education, resolving the Palestinian question, regional integration and more. But worst-case scenarios had been averted, at least in most countries, at least in most periods of time: prolonged internal conflicts, massive human rights violations, blatant interference in the affairs of neighbouring countries, state disintegration concomitant with the breakdown of services and access to food and water followed by mass movements of people.

And yet, the disintegration of the state project and machinery did not happen suddenly with the advent of the Arab uprisings of 2010 onwards. For the fall of the Arab State can be traced back to the challenges of Islamic and pan-Arab movements, the withering away of a generation of charismatic autocrats, the dwindling of cold-war-driven international support, the tardiness and severe limits on reform efforts, the erosive impact of the changes in regional and social media, and the expanding space of the private sector and NGOs providing services. Matar argues that globalisation was a major factor in weakening the Arab State. When demonstrators

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shouted ‘the people want to topple the regime,’ they were bringing down the remnants of an order that had outlived its shelf life.

This weakness of the State is ominous as civil society structures remain nascent, while political processes for ensuring law and order, negotiating policies and distributing resources are far from effective. Under these circumstances, the possibilities of civil unrest, intra-regional conflict and outside intervention have the potential to increase in the future.

The rise of Islamic forces further damaged the legitimacy of states, for the ideology they presented was centred on the concepts of an Islamic *Umma*, the return of the *Caliphate* and the destruction of the state structures enforced by colonialism. The Arab world, long anathematic to the way it was carved up by Sykes-Picot, had settled down to the business of separate flags, multiple national anthems and border checkpoints. The ideology of Arab nationalism was reshaped to suit the needs of the State: superseding the fault lines of religions, sects and tribes that were moulded into artificial borders drawn on that spring day in Knightsbridge.\(^3\) Now, this order was breaking up with a return to primordial identities: Christian-Muslim, Shia-Sunni, and Kurdish-Anbari; new states and *de facto* states within states: South Sudan, South Lebanon, Kurdistan, and now territories occupied and administered by armed groups in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. Outside powers enacted policies that extended *de facto* recognition to these entities (arming Kurds, Iraqi Sunni tribes, receiving their leaders in Western capitals, and conducting high level visits to their territories, etc.). In a word, ‘political violence is remaking Arab societies.’\(^4\)

Many thought that the legitimacy of the State had been fatally damaged, and feared that ‘all the King’s men and all the King’s horses…could not put it back together again.’ Some aspects of this dynamic are ongoing, even though in some cases they have been arrested and reversed.\(^5\) This weakness of the State is ominous as civil society structures remain nascent, while political processes for ensuring law and order, negotiating policies and distributing resources are far from effective. Under these circumstances, the possibilities of civil unrest, intra-regional conflict and outside intervention have the potential to increase in the future.

**The Returning State**

The forces of chaos that arrived with the Arab uprisings were formidable. Much pent-up anger and tension was unleashed: industrial and public services strikes, demands for wage increases, religious and ethnic frictions and armed groups raising Islamic flags. With an injured state, organised and unorganised crime joined the prey: kidnappers, carjackers, petty criminals, people smugglers and rough landlords pulling down heritage in the dead of night to construct housing blocks. Hawkers rapidly multiplied, selling second-hand garments on the street corners of elegant avenues of old. Economic growth slumped and unemployment soared.

Once activated, these forces were enough to scare important segments of societies: the private sector, minorities, women, intellectuals, secular political groups, liberals and the media, but also, more importantly, the remaining representatives of the ‘old’ or ‘deep’ state: internal security structures, the police and the military. These forces of ‘order’ were far from finished. Thus, in several Arab countries that had experienced uprisings in one form or another, the State returned with a vengeance,\(^6\) most dramatically in

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\(^3\) Where it was secretly signed at the Hyde Park Hotel.


\(^5\) TALEB, Nassim Nicholas and TREVORTON, Gregory F. argue that several factors influence regime fragility, “(f)or countries, fragility has five principal sources: a centralised governing system, an undiversified economy, excessive debt and leverage, a lack of political variability, and no history of surviving past shocks.” See: “The Calm Before the Storm: Why Volatility Signals Stability, and Vice Versa,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan/Feb 2015.

Egypt, but also in other cases (for example, Tunisia, Jordan, Bahrain, and Oman). The security apparatus swung back into action, taking control of the streets, lashing out at dissidents with its toughest punches saved for those carrying arms and terrorists; economic rewards were promised and, in some cases, were delivered, even as the media trumpeted the need for stability and conspiracy theories abounded. Secular politicians, including those associated with the ancien regimes moved back into the limelight while Islamists were further marginalised, if not banned altogether. The forceful return of the State creates its own challenges. With what has been called the ‘militarisation of Arab politics,’ ending Arab ‘exceptionalism’ has been pushed further into the future. With democratic progress and human rights taking a back seat in most Arab countries, Western powers are facing soul-searching questions on their policies, with idealism pitted against realism, particularly as important Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) players favour stability over unpredictable change.

The Regional Chessboard

Deep changes are also underway in the regional landscape or context, to the extent that this represents a separate system of actors with its own dynamics, differentiated from both the global system and internal politics. Indeed it is possible to differentiate between two regional sub-orders: one Arab (comprising most Arab states), the other Middle Eastern (comprising Iran, Israel and Turkey). In the Arab system, changes include the more assertive role of Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries, most dramatically exemplified by the intervention in Yemen, but traceable through a series of policies and positions: interventions in Bahrain, Syria and Libya, strong support to Sisi in Egypt, differences with the US. There are also the signs of an Egyptian reassertion: engaging internationally with major powers, pushing for a joint Arab military force, undertaking military strikes in Libya, and joining ‘Operation Decisive Storm.’ There is also the activist space occupied by super rich small states, mainly Qatar and UAE. The cycles of interaction and linkage remain active in the Arab system. These were beneficial in the case of the flow of labour to the Gulf, with substantial remittances, investments and direct financial support going in the other direction. Significantly, the number of Arab satellite stations has mushroomed from around 25 in the late 1990s to 1,300 at present, owned by 776 entities, most of them private. These include specialised channels (151 broadcasters of drama, 146 of sports, 125 of religion, 124 of music and 66 of news). Yet, Gulf-owned broadcasters and Egypt-based ones seem to hold sway, as is the case with a few regional newspapers. Taken together, media has created a dynamic and politically relevant platform for inter-Arab interactions closely linked to the formation of political views, breaking the monopoly of governments and providing up-to-date information.

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These attempts to re-establish an Arab order are challenged by new forces, which are difficult to track or predict: non-state actors, like Daesh (Islamic State), striking at the heart of the Arab system, invoking Islamic unity, withdrawing recognition of borders, destroying history and culture. These efforts to strengthen the regional state system are also handicapped by the limitations of regional processes, instruments and institutions: the weakness

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of the League of Arab States (LAS), the absence of a regional security organisation, the paucity of inter-Arab trade and the vast contrast in the fortunes of Arab countries.

These developments came at a cost: thus the long-standing weights of the central causes in regional dynamics have changed with Palestine receding as a focus for debate and a cause for divisions. And yet these new issues have taken on some of the characteristics of the old ones, like tenacity and resistance to solutions. For example, the Syrian situation has turned into a low intensity, protracted conflict that may extend for many years with repercussions for neighbouring countries.

A related development is the increased interaction, indeed intervention, of the ‘Middle East order’ in the ‘Arab order’ with each of Iran, Israel and Turkey playing direct roles in one Arab conflict or the other: Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen to mention a few. This development has been coloured by the introduction of a religious-identity dimension with an emphasis on the Shia-Sunni schism, aligning Turkey with the Gulf Sunni kingdoms, resisting Iran’s expansionist role in the region.

There is also a growth in the list of ‘failed states’ together with increased instances of international intervention via the UN Security Council, the ICC, or other mechanisms (eg Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and Sudan). Yet the role of international actors is also related to the dynamics of their own relations. Thus, while at one moment it appeared as if the US and Russia were trying to co-manage the region (eg the Iran 5+1 deal, Syrian chemical weapons, Geneva II) they now seem to have moved into a more competitive relationship (post-Ukraine) with some signs of a Russian bid to re-enter the Middle East. The reactions of Arab states to the policies of international actors add complexity to these dynamics. Thus, the 5+1 deal on Iran’s nuclear capabilities has raised alarm signals concerning US policy in Arab countries.

At the same time, the US’ pivot to Asia is viewed as a sign of further disengagement from the Middle East, downsizing the region’s importance and destabilising its security and power formulas.

While direct Western intervention in the region seems to have peaked, there is a search for new policies and instruments to maintain influence or control. While the US seeks to continue its withdrawal and avoid ‘boots on the ground,’ the age-old instruments of military alliances, bases and supplies have returned at the centre of US-Arab relations. Other players (Russia, France, UK and Germany) are deep into arms sales to the region without reference to wider frames of resolving conflicts, maintaining a balance of forces or indeed reducing armaments.

The EU appears torn between the idealism of defending principles (eg human rights, democratic institutions, etc.) on the one hand, and, on the other, ensuring its self-interest (eg markets, energy supplies, protection against waves of migrants, jihadists). The question for Europe remains: how to engage and ‘ride the tiger’ of change in the Middle East.

Deeper Forces of Change

Beneath these symptoms, deeper forces are at play in the region. The huge increases in population place it on a trajectory towards doubling the current Arab population by 2050 to some 650 million, mostly urbanised and with a high percentage of young people. According to the International Labour Organisation, the Arab world already has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world and

will need to create an additional 74 million jobs in the next 15 years to absorb new entrants to its job market. This is equivalent to a 75% increase in its workforce, or equal to the total growth of its workforce between 1950 and 2000. And yet, faltering growth rates do not auger well for the future. The pressures of the youth factor will remain as a force for instability and change with demands for education, jobs and housing far beyond the capacity of the economies to deliver. These tectonic changes are reflected in the severe deterioration of the economic situation and quality of life for a large number of people in the region as a result of conflicts, climate change factors and slow economic growth: refugees, internally displaced, and slum dwellers. The ranks of the poor continue to be replenished and expanded. For the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the region, even for lower middle-income countries, the path ahead for raising incomes is harsh and hope is far removed.

Future Scenarios

The demise of the State, its resurgence, regional and international interactions and deeper structural changes: these four sets of dynamics, or interactions, or cycles of changes will probably be central in shaping the strategic landscape of the Arab region. They reflect deep strategic shifts that followed the Arab upheavals and some of the key drivers of future scenarios.12

When attempting to predict the future, there is a danger of excessive extrapolation from the present. Indeed the history of predating the future of the Arab world is more that of partial analysis, overlooked drivers and major unpredicted events: the 1973 war, the Sadat peace initiative, the assassination of Sadat, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the Arab uprisings after 2010, the rise of Daesh, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen and more. There are also errors of excessive pessimism or optimism (albeit this latter category is currently in short supply). Theoretically, four alternative scenarios can be delineated: (a) Continue as is; (b) Change to better (under the influence of internal and / or external factors, probably both); (c) Mixed case; (d) Black Swan scenarios.

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Scenario (a): Continuity of Chaos

The present picture of chaos in the south and eastern Mediterranean may last for another decade or two. For example, Richard Haas has argued that the region may be facing another 30-year war similar to that of Europe in the 17th century.13 The implications are that the West should follow conflict management strategies rather than risk being enmeshed in the region’s labyrinth: reduce dependence on oil from the region, prevent nuclear proliferation, follow counter terrorism strategies, accept the break-up of Iraq and accommodate the Assad regime in Syria.

There are costs herein to Europe: waves of migrants crossing from the south, returning jihadists from Syria and Iraq, threatened energy supplies and lost opportunities of trade and growth. A policy of disengagement may carry higher costs of losing influence over events, prolonged crisis and disorder and living with unpalatable longer-term consequences.

Option (b): Best Case

In this scenario, miraculously, the transitions in the south and eastern Mediterranean result in stable, democratic and economically promising governments. Key conflicts and difficult transitions are re-

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12 The following segment of this article is heavily dependent on my earlier article and presentation: “Some features of post Arab Spring and their implications for the Mediterranean,” International Seminar on Towards “Helsinki +40”: The OSCE, the Global Mediterranean and the Future of Cooperative Security, Instituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, 18 September 2014.

solved peacefully with solutions found for the Arab-Israeli tragedy as well as in other regional problems (Arab-Iranian relations, Syria, Libya, etc.). A nuclear-free zone is established and arrangements are in place for arms control through a regional security organisation. Fertility rates have declined as education and employment indicators have hugely improved.

One characteristic of this scenario is that it requires a participatory process of analysis and planning that involves governments and civil society, preferably from both sides of the Mediterranean, together with relevant regional organisations (LAS, GCC, EU and OSCE). It is possible to envision this scenario as part of the often-discussed ‘Marshall Plan’ for the Middle East, which would include additional roles for the US, the Gulf, the World Bank, the IMF and other international bodies. This could be based on a detailed longer-term vision that could be called ‘Med 2050.’

It may be difficult to imagine this rosy picture in the context of the present negative reality. And yet, it may be encouraged and supported through the application of a set of policies including more aggressive peace-building and problem-solving initiatives, investment in quality education, the progressive application of EU standards in the south/eastern Mediterranean, more flexible free-trade arrangements, and support to examples of good governance where they materialise (eg Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan). A central factor that will be required is more serious Arab regional cooperation if not integration. Optimism, as Collin Powell once said, is a force multiplier.

Option (c): Mixed

Reality is often complex, carrying some of our preferences while frustrating us with continuing problems and setbacks. Here is where realpolitik needs to absorb idealistic objectives while dealing with facts on the ground. This scenario, perhaps the most probable one, would see a continuation of a certain level of conflict and disagreement as well as difficult transitions that include quasi-democratic regimes, slow reform processes and faltering economic growth. But it would also show success through respect to human rights, empowering women and improving health and education services. A key factor would be to support an enlightened role for governments and state structures in the context of reforms and in the face of threats of disintegration and factionalism. Some sectors of the economy would show notable improvement (eg agriculture, tourism, the garment industry, small and medium enterprises). The question would be how to steer this scenario towards the more attractive Option II rather than that of Option I.

A toolkit based on practical incentives and disincentives will be needed, not only to reward success and punish failures but also to actively engage in empowering leaders and people, encouraging change and conflict management and guiding transitions, more specifically in building democracy, avoiding state failures and combating terrorism.

Option (d): Black Swan

For unexpected scenarios, the question would be what it would take to move towards dramatically better situations, or much worse scenarios. Most probably, such changes would be internally driven rather than being the result of external factors. One key element would be political leadership, whereby the emergence of one or two visionary leaders could influence the direction of change. Bad leaders would obviously take the region, or important regional powers, in the opposite direction. In terms of surprise scenarios, there is the possibility of coups in one of the oil-producing countries, in the Gulf or elsewhere in the region, or in a non-oil country with a royal regime. Herein are possibilities for the role of external powers: engaging and influencing leaders through continuous high-level dialogue and exposure to good models. This needs to expand through a wider process of engaging civil society, media and youth. But practical results will be needed to show success and combat frustrations. Probably there will be a need to increase the level of European (indeed Western) investments and time allocation, in terms of developing common policies, launching initiatives, earmarking more substantial financial resources and improving management processes.

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But the question remains if this will be possible in the context of the present political and economic environment in Europe.

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There is also a need to strengthen contingency planning for worst-case scenarios stemming from unexpected events: a conflict involving nuclear capacities, acts of major human rights violations, a natural disaster in the midst of a prolonged civil war with vast ungoverned areas, or the sudden removal of a key leader from the scene, followed by chaos. It is no coincidence that the precedents and seeds for these situations are alive and well (e.g. the Israeli-Iran conflict, Sudan’s problems, Syria’s civil war, the actions of Daesh and the situation in Libya, Iraq and Yemen).

**Conclusion**

Dramatic changes are currently taking place in the south and eastern Mediterranean making it difficult to foresee the longer-term future of the region. New conflicts have been added while older ones continue. New challenges include the confused transition processes reflected in factionalism, instability, economic deterioration and, in many cases, the threat of failed states. Hybrid entities have taken over state functions while claiming international roles. Most worryingly, there seems to be little capacity to analyse this picture and develop strategies to respond to it on the part of regional states, relevant intergovernmental organisations or external powers. And yet, the hopes of the Arab Spring have not died. Wider political participation has become a reality. Youth leaders are emerging through political systems with dreams of change and experience gained from exposure to politics. Women are more actively defending their rights. Here lies a challenge for external powers and organisations to engage with the forces of change rather than retreat behind the false security of protective walls. There are several structural forces in the south and eastern Mediterranean that will probably influence the future direction of change: population growth, economic performance, urbanisation, the status of women and education. These need to be the focus of longer-term policies with substantial resources and tenacious implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Again, herein lies a key role for external powers in addressing these underlying factors in favour of positive outcomes.

But there is also a need for more aggressive strategies for conflict resolution, conflict prevention and peace-building. The experiences of Europe will be relevant provided they are presented through creative diplomacy, more generosity in the service of longer-term self-interest and a much higher level of political will and determination.

In the longer term, twenty or thirty years from now, the south and eastern Mediterranean, reflecting the dynamics of the Arab world more than those of the Middle East, may metamorphose into one of four futures: chaotic, positive, mixed or surprising. Again, the structural drivers of change will probably play a key role in determining which scenario materialises, although the mixed option appears the most realistic one. Yet, it is the current actions of leaders and institutions on both sides of the Mediterranean that can influence the direction of future change and steer the region towards more positive results. Abdicating this responsibility should not be an option.