

## PART TWO



## The Changing Order in the Middle East

# WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES EXPECT FROM THE MIDDLE EAST?

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During the last year, the United States has lurched from crisis to crisis in the Middle East, including every state in North Africa. Sometimes the focus has been Egypt, sometimes Syria, and sometimes Iran. Iraq and Yemen have surfaced sporadically. Libya has become a garden of conspiracy theories blaming America for the country's ills, and as for Tunisia and Bahrain, it remains unclear what U.S. policy efforts are intended to accomplish.

It is time that the United States and the world realize that the “Arab Spring” will be at least a decade of crisis that affects Iran and Israel as much as the Arab states. It is all too clear that no state in the region is safe, with the possible exception of the wealthiest oil exporting states in the Gulf—each of which is vulnerable to instability from neighbors. It is equally clear that the broader regional instability will affect the other surrounding states like Turkey and those in the Horn of Africa, as well as all states dependent on the region's petroleum exports, trade, and transit routes.

The region's violence thus has consequences as far afield as the Philippines, Thailand, Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and the United States. Moreover, it has become equally clear that what Samuel Huntington once termed a “clash of civilizations” is something very different. The Middle East and North Africa are the epicenter of a struggle for the future of Islam and the control of largely Islamic states that spread from East Asia to Morocco.

The overwhelming number of victims, however, comes from conflict between Sunni extremists and the vast majority of more moderate Sunnis, Shi'ites and other sects of Islam. The extremists target Muslims and other faiths in



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Islamic countries or countries with large Islamic minorities ranging from India to Lebanon.

Terrorist casualties from al Qaeda and other foreign Islamist terrorist movements in both the United States and Europe have been minimal since the mid-2000s, and estimates by sources like the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and Combating Terrorism Center at West Point indicate that between 82 percent and 97 percent of the casualties of Islamic extremists have been Muslim. Almost all have been in primarily Islamic countries or countries with very large and long-standing Muslim minorities like India and Nigeria.

Far too often, the policy debate in the United States on the Middle East focuses on Washington trying to address each current political crisis in turn. Administration officials tried to deal with Egypt by focusing on the legal definition of “coup,” and by hoping we could somehow negotiate a settlement between the army and Muslim Brotherhood. The administration dealt with Syria largely by trying to ignore the civil war and then switching to a focus on chemical weapons. In most other cases, the appearance is that Washington has tried to ignore the deeper internal dynamics in favor of hoping for the best.

It is time that we accept the sheer scale of the forces at work. The increasingly violent struggle for the future of Islam is the product of decades of failed secular politics and governance in state after state and is tied to mass demographic problems, weak or failed economic development, and deep sectarian, ethnic, and tribal fissures. Nor can we ignore decades of failed efforts to create viable political structures, effective and honest governance, as well as rule of law and internal security.

Calls for rapid democracy, rule of law, and human rights based on Western values ignore the lack of viable institutions to build upon. These calls ignore the reality that only violence or massive popular upheavals are likely to bring political change in this context. But popular upheavals cannot produce a stable resolution of the political forces they unleash because there are no quick answers and states have no viable political systems, structures of governance, or in many cases functioning economies that can meet popular expectations in less than a decade.

Americans should remember that their own revolution is a historical exception that left forces at play that led to the Civil War. The French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the overall history of Europe from 1848 to at least the end of World War II, and the rapid collapse of almost every postcolonial “democracy” into a coup or “one man, one vote, one time” rule provide ample warning that those who start revolutions almost never survive in power to finish them unless they too become autocrats; that revolutionary leaders rise out of political conspiracy and generally lack real experience in compromise and practical politics, and have little or no experience in governance.

Consider the forces that only time and repeated crises can tame: as nearly two decades of UN Arab Human Development Reports and U.S. State Department human rights reports have shown, there is little real rule of law in states where parallel legal systems legitimize star chamber security proceedings, and ordinary justice and policing are dysfunctional and corrupt. Constitutions are often

just scraps of paper or used selectively to reinforce state power. Human rights are caught up in ethnic, sectarian, political, and religious struggles and are often largely a matter of relative position and status. Corruption, crony capitalism, grimly inefficient state sectors, gross state overemployment, steadily worsening equity of income distribution, and poorly distributed oil income mean that these states sharply underinvest in education and medical systems, as well as housing, water, and infrastructure.

As the UN Arab Development Reports warned, these forces operate in largely desert states that have populations at least three times—often more than four times—what they were in 1950 and that will increase by roughly another 40 to 50 percent by 2050. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the total population of the Middle East and North Africa grew from 81.6 million in 1950 to 392.4 million in 2013—some 4.8 times—and will grow to 580.5 million in 2050—another 48 percent.

Two crisis cases illustrate the demographic pressures involved. In Egypt’s case, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that its population grew from 22.2 million in 1950 to 85.3 million in 2013 and will grow to 137.8 million in 2050 in spite of hyper-urbanization and a dropping rate of population growth. The other MENA states with the largest populations have similar demographics. In Syria’s case, its population grew from 3.5 million in 1950 to 22.5 million in 2013 and will grow to 37.7 million in 2050, and Syria is typical in that at least a third of its current population is 14 years of age or younger.

The region’s limited land, water, capital, and market structures have created a different and growing kind of crisis. They have made many states food-import-dependent at the same time people have been driven off the land. Hyper-urbanization, growing super slums, and nationwide poverty affect even oil states like Saudi Arabia.

The average per capita income tells a grim story, even if one ignores growing income inequalities that have badly shrunk or limited the incomes of the



middle class while making the rich far more wealthy. While the United States has a per capita income of \$50,700, which ranks 14th in the world, the CIA estimates Egypt has a per capita income of \$6,700, which ranks 143rd in the world. Syria had a per capita income of \$5,100 in 2011, which ranked 159th in the world.

In spite of the impression that all oil states are wealthy, the petroleum disease is all too real: Algeria has a per capita income of \$7,600 (137th in the world), Libya has a per capita income of \$12,300 (141st in the world), Iraq has a per capita income of \$7,200 (143rd in the world), Iran has a per capita income of \$13,300 (100th in the world), and even Saudi Arabia has a per capita income of \$31,800 (46th in the world).

The wealthier and better educated in the Arab world also face major problems. Increasingly better educated women cannot find productive jobs. Male youth unemployment and underemployment among university graduates are well over 20 percent and sometimes 40 percent for at least two years after graduation. In 2010, the year before the Arab Spring, estimates put the number of directly unemployed young men in the MENA region at well over 25 million. Underemployment is a far more serious problem at every level of education. Token jobs for males disguise a massive lack of real productivity, as do grossly inflated service sectors, security forces, and civil services.

This mix of forces affects every country differently and to a different degree. Some countries have regimes that will find ways of dealing with these forces of change. Some will be able to evolve with only minimal changes to their power structure and government. Some will undergo change under new authoritarians, and all too many will have at least a half decade or more of repeated upheavals and changes in regime by coup, civil war, or massive popular unrest. Sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and regional violence, as well as wars or power struggles with neighboring states, will occur in the process, as will radicalization of violent elements of their populations producing violent extremism, terrorism, and equally violent repression.

The United States cannot ignore these realities. Every year increases U.S. dependence on the global economy, as well as the dependence of U.S. employment and job creation on global trends. According to U.S. Department of Energy estimates made in 2013, the United States will not achieve energy independence through 2035. Large reserves of domestic shale gas will only reduce direct import dependence to 67 percent for a limited number of years.

The United States will remain dependent on imports from Asia and Europe (and U.S. exports to these countries), who in turn are dependent on Middle Eastern and North African oil and gas exports. Moreover, our domestic petroleum and non-petroleum import prices will rise along with world prices during any regional energy crisis.

No friendly Arab state or Israel can be secure without U.S. military support and aid. Regional stability will not be possible without a strong U.S. military presence, a growing emphasis on partnerships in

security and counterterrorism, and U.S. efforts to negotiate the way out of internal and international conflicts, as well as provide military help to deter, contain, and end them.

If the United States is to deal with these realities, we must begin to recognize that crisis diplomacy and the use of force can at best create temporary solutions to aid truly urgent U.S. national security interests. We must realize that the fight against terrorism and extremism cuts much deeper than dealing with today's symptoms like al

Qaeda and will continue, mutate, and surge again until the underlying causes are gradually removed.

We must realize that many core values in the Middle East and North Africa are tied to Islamic, Arab, and local standards—not ours. Calls for instant democracy are most likely to return to the same results of the postcolonial era of “one man, one vote, one time.” Human rights are not universally observed or aspired to, and will evolve slowly and in

different ways. The United States cannot control or shape internal civil wars and revolution when they occur, only exert limited pressure and influence—supporting the best elements and putting pressure on the worst.

Truly effective economic reform will take years—and probably more than a decade—of outside influence, pressure, and carefully focused aid. Restructuring military and security forces will take similar years of patient U.S. military advisory efforts and support. Talk of international standards for the rule of law, constitutions, and policing will be no substitute for years of patient advisory efforts.

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The United States cannot accomplish any of this through rhetoric, region-wide efforts at public diplomacy, sanctions, cutting off aid, trying to manage the region from Washington, or treating different countries and mixes of problems as if they were all the same. No real progress can come from focusing on each crisis as if more were not to come, and solving the crisis could do more than temporarily treat the symptoms rather than the underlying cause.

The United States needs to address each country case individually, although it cannot ignore the full range of regional and outside forces at work. It needs to realize that effective influence is exerted on a country-by-country basis and largely by U.S. country teams. It is the slow, evolutionary impact of political, military, counterterrorism, economic, and human rights efforts by the country teams to exert patient and consistent pressure and aid on a target of opportunity that can have the best hope of achieving progress.

The United States cannot succeed by lurching from crisis to crisis any more than it can succeed by calling for the end of history or hoping for an idealized cloning of the American Revolution. It cannot succeed by backing an uncertain mix of exiles, or using force without regard to strategy. Force may be necessary, but force will only be meaningful if linked to efforts to have an impact on changes to politics and governance.

The United States must focus on strategic patience and continuing efforts over at least the coming decade. It must accept major reversals as inevitable, take casualties in the process, and try and try again. Like the Cold War, this will be an era of slow progress, progress through patient influence, and willingness to achieve change and progress with the aid of allies and international institutions. Patience and a willingness to accept complexity are not always American values. This time they had better be. ►