The whirlwind in the Arab nation, 2014–15: from regime change to state collapse

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This article is based on the executive summary of a book in the Arabic language, *The State of the Arab Nation 2014–2015*, edited by Ali E.Hillal Dessouki and published by the Center for Arab Unity Studies. The book analyzes events in the Arab region from 2014 to the first part of 2015. The chapters examine the international order, the Arab regional system, and domestic conditions in the Arab states and neighbouring countries, such as Turkey and Iran. There is also particular focus on the countries of the Arab Spring and the remaining Arab countries, as well as the outlook for the youth in Arab countries and their role in future. Other chapters consider economic developments and their link to political developments and issues relating to science, technology and digital technologies. The final chapters cover the major political hotspots in the region, namely Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. The conclusion points to the main challenges facing the Arab nation in 2015.

Keywords: Arab regional order; Arab Spring; international order; Islamic State (IS)

Introduction

This article is based on the executive summary of an Arabic-language book published by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies.¹

How will historians describe 2014?

Will they describe it as the worst year ever for the Arab nation, as has done Nabil al-Arabi, Secretary General of the Arab League? Or will they, like James Clapper, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (in his testimony before Congress), refer to it as ‘the most lethal year for global terrorism in […] 45 years’? This year saw an explosion of religious and sectarian conflicts within single countries and across borders, in addition to the fragmenting central authority of state actors and the control by non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations and armed militias. Or perhaps historians will record that this year, despite the harsh and bitter events, laid the foundations for a new Arab consciousness, that the existing conditions and policies have led to this bloody scene, and that this awareness is the start of a movement towards the path of integrating and uniting the elements of Arab power?

The fact is that 2014 did not emerge out of nothing, and the events and developments witnessed are a continuation and accumulation of the events of previous

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years. What happened in 2014 is the climax and result of the policies pursued by most Arab governments over decades. The outcomes of these policies include: political and social exclusion, restrictions on public space and civil and political freedoms, distorted economic development, a dependence on the rentier sectors, continuing foreign economic exposure and subsequent dependency, the widening gap in income and wealth distribution between rich and poor, the continual deterioration of education, health and other basic necessities, and the resultant decline in the balance of social capital in these countries. The events of 2014, most of which have their origins and roots in what we observed and recorded in 2013, therefore, come as no surprise.

The international order

The book begins by asking the question whether the age of American hegemony in the region has ended. It deals with the issue of the future of the international system after the end of the Cold War, particularly in light of the escalating ‘debate’ on the importance of changing in a balanced way. This would include specifying the nature of power relations between the parties and the type of organized frameworks, rules and norms for the interactions between its elements. This is all the more important given the signs of unrest that have prevailed in the interactions in the system. The most notable of these is departing from or neglecting the scope of rules and norms governing the interactions between the various forces, while continuing to use double standards in the application of these rules, and the continuation of the framework structure of most of the international system’s institutions without any development. Moreover, the changes experienced by the system during 2014 indicated the increasing combination of the geopolitical and geo-economic factors in the context of international interactions, the escalating power of non-state actors, the expanding belt of failed states and cross-border crises, the growth of interdependent relationships among the international power, and the emergence of significant changes in the behaviour of the big powers towards the Arab countries. All that has had an influence on the Arab nation, which Richard Haas regards as the ‘chief cauldron of contemporary disorder’ in the world (Haass 2014), and Henry Kissinger has described as possessing the greatest threat to international stability and potential for religious conflicts and wars (Kamal 2014).

From this context, it can be deduced that the greatest winner from the state of the international order in its present form is China, which has benefitted from the Russian–American dispute over Ukraine and the lowering of oil prices to strengthen its strategic position. The next winner is Russia, which has been forced by pressure from American and other Western powers to strengthen its alliances with the other big and medium international powers. Similarly, the most obvious losers from the interactions of the international order are the Arab countries. That is by virtue of the change in American interests in the region, with Washington turning into the greatest producer of oil in the world and trying to take the place of Saudi Arabia as a balance for the oil market. It is also by virtue of the growing threats that the Arab countries face from non-state actors, principally Islamic State (IS), and the fact that a number of countries in the region have been dragged into armed ethnic conflicts. Added to that is the Russian–Turkish cooperation in the field of energy, and the American and Western direction towards building cooperative relations with Iran, as well as the big powers’ continuing support for the Israeli viewpoint.

As for the main trends concerning the big powers and their relationship with interactions in the region, Washington is still confused and unable to deal with the regional
crises and the basis for this is the absence of a strategic vision for dealing with world crises. Russia in 2014 tried repeatedly to strengthen its strategic positions and returned to practising the role of an agent in the international order. That was due to the results of its confrontation with Washington and the countries of the European Union over Ukraine. Hence, Russia bolstered its relations with China as well as the regional and international organizations and institutions in Asia. It deepened its relationships with Iran and Turkey, and expanded its cooperation with the Arab countries collectively or through bilateral relations with Egypt. With regard to China, it continued its planned rise, exploiting the fragmented state of the international order and China was also the biggest beneficiary of the decline in oil prices. The Russian–Western conflict led to a relative lowering of Western pressure on China with some Western nations attempting to attract China, or at least neutralize it, in this conflict through economic incentives. Furthermore, the European Union has been trying to create a space of relative independence from the United States without opposing or clashing with it.

There are six scenarios for the formation of the international order, though one is not more likely than others: the end of the period of American hegemony; the reproduction of American hegemony; the alternative hegemony by another international power; the multilateral hegemony among the major international powers who share regions of influence; the hegemony by agency where the big powers depend on other regional non-Arab powers for tasks to dominate, control and hold sway in the Arab nation; and the rejection of hegemony for positive participation in the building, shaping and managing the new system. It should be noted that there is no necessary relationship between the end of American hegemony over the international system and the end of that hegemony in the Arab nation, since this requires many conditions.

These scenarios represent a list of possibilities, and it is not inevitable that any of them will be imposed or realized. The issue is the interactions of the Arab nation and the available political will. One scenario is highly desirable and supported with a will for its realization, while the other scenarios do not benefit from the same aspects.

**Domestic conditions in neighbouring countries**

The development of domestic conditions in the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia has influenced their relations with the Arab countries. Turkey was burdened by the internal and external effects of the previous year, the most important of which were the protests in Taksim Square and Gezi Park, and the scandal of financial corruption. It is noticeable that the country entered 2014 with high expectations that these effects would lead to a decline in the authority of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), especially its leader and head of the government, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

However, these expectations were not met. At the domestic level, the AKP won in the municipal elections held on 30 March 2014 with 47% of the votes, making Erdoğan eligible to run for the presidency. This is what happened and Erdoğan was able to gain victory in the first round. This result did not come as a surprise since the polls had predicted that he would have a 57% share, rather than the 51.7% obtained. Nonetheless, this percentage was enough for him to win the presidency and announce that he was ready to work at putting his ideas into effect, the chief one being the transition to a presidential system that would grant him greater authority and power.

On the other hand, the experience of an opposition agreement for a joint candidate, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, was not a bad one but was the first attempt at an alliance and coordination among the opposition parties against the ruling AKP in 12 years. Thus,
an example was established for future alliances in parliamentary and municipal elections which can benefit from the flaws in this experience. After his victory, Erdoğan immediately began preparations for his succession in the party and the government and paved the way for Ahmet Davutoğlu to take over his office. Erdoğan’s choice was dictated by his personal and political considerations because both men share the same vision about the importance of Turkey’s progress on the basis of its Ottoman–Seljuk heritage.

The struggle between Erdoğan and his political rival, Fethullah Gülen, continued. The year 2014 is considered the time at which what was called the ‘parallel entity’ was eliminated as Erdoğan amended laws and expelled thousands of Gülen’s followers from their posts, especially those in the police, judiciary, education and media sectors. In addition, the peace process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), led by Abdullah Öcalan, did not reach a solution that was satisfactory to both parties and achieve political stability and security. Similarly, the Alawite issue did not see any progress or resolution. Furthermore, there were also continued attempts to gag and harass the opponents of Erdoğan by arresting or expelling them, or by subjecting them to pressure.

In foreign policy, Turkey’s relations with Egypt, under the presidency of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, deteriorated further, with strong reactions over the latter’s full confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkish–Gulf relations also declined, particularly with both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, the emergence of IS and its expansion in Iraq after Syria, and the formation of the international coalition against terrorism, was a pressing factor for Turkey in its view of regional developments.

The most prominent image of Turkish foreign policy in 2014 was the country’s increasing, or rather complete, isolation. With the exception of the special relationship with Qatar, Turkey’s relationship with all other Arab countries was fractured or collapsed. Erdoğan still gambled on achieving his project of ‘neo-Ottomanism’ (Ottoman plus Seljuk), which means clashes with all ethnic components in the region, including the Arabs, Kurds, Iranians, Armenians and others, as well as the collision with non-Muslim religious components, especially with the Christians and with the Muslim Brotherhood Sunni and Shi’i components. Here precisely is the hidden danger for Turkey itself and for its neighbours, which under the AKP regime have come to represent a threat to peace and stability at home and in the region (Nur al-Din 2015).

In 2014, Iran faced two strategic challenges, namely the negotiations on its nuclear programme and its continuing influence in Iraq that aims to maintain its role and position in the Middle East. In addition, a major pressure factor for tens of millions of Iranians has been the deteriorating state of the economy, which reached its worst point when President Hassan Rouhani came to power. Therefore, the president raised the slogans for dialogue and diplomacy, saying that the dialogue with the West could open prospects for cooperation in all fields and the lifting of sanctions that would make the financial and economic situation much better. However, President Rouhani faced double criticism from conservative and reformist directions because he was unable to make significant progress on the economy, with the exception of offering direct financial assistance to the Iranians. That was because the negotiations with the West to lift the sanctions did not have a result in reaching an agreement until 3 April 2015.

Therefore, Iran does not want to create a change in the regional balance under these circumstances or in the strategic balance in the confrontation with the United States.
has continued to support the Syrian regime as it does not view events in Syria as an internal battle only. There is a strategic goal that has priority in this ‘battle’, as read by Iran, and this is the goal of Washington and its allies in the achievement of a strategic victory over Iran.

With the occupation of Mosul by IS on 12 June 2014, Iran felt worried as IS has become part of the regional scene and of the new balances that have made the interests of Iran and its allies the object of a direct threat, on the one hand. On the other hand, the United States’ requirement for a change in government in Baghdad to fight IS was considered by Iran as a direct threat to its own influence through the removal of its ally, Nouri al-Maliki. In the end, Tehran responded to the Iraqi (and American) view on the need to remove al-Maliki and try to establish a national unity government (Farazi 2014).

The international coalition led by the United States to fight IS caused an additional concern for Iran, which had decided to provide direct military assistance to the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as well as specialists from the Revolutionary Guard. None of the international powers objected to this Iranian role in the fight against IS. Thus, Iran alongside the Iraqi forces and the popular resistance forces fought field battles in the cities and towns occupied by IS, and these forces were able to liberate large areas from the hands of IS, most notably the city of Tikrit.

It was expected that the IS occupation of Mosul would lead to a change in the balances of influence and power in Iraq. Nevertheless, the Iranian strategy allowed the restoration of its own influence, which had been relatively and temporarily declining after this event, especially as Iran’s achievements in fighting against IS with direct support achieved more than the achievements of the international coalition against terrorism. However, this does not mean that Iran will feel reassured in the near future because the region around it is still ablaze, the conflict in Syria still continues, and especially as the conflict over the Houthi expansion in Yemen resulted in the military intervention by a number of Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Iran’s relations with more than one Arab country are tense and the balance of power in the Middle East and the Arab countries is unstable and in a state of sectarian and communal polarization. On the other hand, the signing of the framework agreement with the big powers must give Iran a greater amount of self-confidence.

During 2014, Ethiopia began to promote what it called energy diplomacy. This was aimed at stimulating domestic support for its projects relating, on the one hand, to the construction of dams, and, on the other hand, at enticing neighbouring countries to support its policy of achieving its interests by providing electrical power for them. These aims were within the framework of Ethiopia’s efforts to become an ‘autonomous’ regional power in a way that would enable it to impose its hegemony on some of the neighbouring countries and wipe out their Arab identity.

The most important internal developments in Ethiopia were the continuing construction of the Renaissance Dam, its evasion in prolonging the negotiations with the two tributary nations of Egypt and Sudan, and its announcement on the construction of other dams which is supported by its economic situation. The economic growth rate exceeded 10% as a result of the inflow of foreign investments in the agricultural, construction and transformational industry sectors. In contrast, the regions within the country did not receive a fair share of the returns of development and that was due to the ruling party’s control over the destiny of the country. It directed these returns to the Tigray region from which most of its ruling elite originate, at the expense of other ethnic groups, and in addition to persecuting the opposition.
Ethiopia strengthened its relations with neighbouring countries. It inaugurated a project to connect electricity in the city of Gadarif (Al-Qadarif) in Sudan and other projects related to linking the two countries by a network of highways. Ethiopia also sought to make South Sudan part of its vital sphere, deploying more than 4000 soldiers in Abyei on the borders between Sudan and South Sudan, and has been working to extend its influence in Djibouti so that it becomes part of its territory, and consolidated its relations with the Afar people who are the dominant power group and extend from Ethiopia to Eritrea, signing a number of projects with them. Additionally, more than 4390 soldiers were spread out among the African Union’s peacekeeping force in Somalia. Despite the period of the tension that prevailed between Ethiopia and Egypt, the size of Egyptian investments in it has noticeably grown to reach US$1 billion during 2014. The Ethiopian regime continued to be wary of Egypt, and March 2015 saw a significant development in Ethiopian–Egyptian relations when Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan signed an agreement of principles, at summit level, comprising 10 articles aimed at bringing together their viewpoints, recognizing the legitimate rights of both Ethiopia and Egypt, and emphasizing their common interests. President Sisi’s visit to Ethiopia the next day was like the beginning of a new page in relations between the two countries, and this was the main message that the president confirmed in his speech to the Ethiopian parliament. Ethiopia also solidified its relations with the Gulf States, especially the UAE and Qatar, which announced the creation of investment projects in Ethiopia.

The Arab regional system

During 2014, terrorism represented the main variable in understanding the state of the Arab regional order due to the results that IS brought about in Iraq and Syria and which it also sought in other countries, like Egypt, Libya and Lebanon. This resulted in some issues moving into the background, such as the Palestinian issue, while new ones came to the fore. These included the formation of an Arab force to confront terrorism, the Arab League’s intervention in political disputes involving some of its members in a way never known or done before, and the growing phenomenon of the external infiltration of the Arab regional system on the regional and global levels.

During this year, changes have happened unexpectedly to the map of conflicts in the Arab region. These have changed in a remarkable manner from a predominance of Arab and regional conflicts to the spread of disputes and conflicts within Arab countries to encompass most of the Arab countries, especially after the attempts at change that have occurred in many Arab countries during 2010–13. Unfamiliar conflicts have emerged, as is particularly the case with the sectarian dimension and the Sunni–Shi’i axis which appears clearly in the cases of Iraq and Syria, and to a lesser extent in the case of Yemen. Likewise, it is clear in the religious dimension of Islam and Christianity resulting from the position toward non-Muslims shown by the extremist organizations which claim to belong to Islam. In addition, the role of non-state actors has developed, as seen with, for example, Hezbollah’s fighting in Lebanon close to the Syrian regime, the phenomenon of IS which announced its state on parts of the lands belonging to Iraq and Syria, and the Hamas movement that Egypt accused of supporting terrorism in Sinai (Idris 2015).

With regard to the types of alliances between Arab countries, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was hampered in its the transition to becoming a union, a plan introduced by the late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in 2011. The
Egyptian–Saudi–Emirati–Bahraini rapprochement held great interest in view of the fact that it could be the emergence of a powerful new Arab alliance, especially after the formation of the Arab coalition for military intervention in Yemen which Egypt participated in it from the beginning.

The Arab League has found itself forced to take positions on internal developments in a number of Arab countries. This behaviour is out of the ordinary in relation to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. The Libyan case was the first and worst of its kind. The ministerial council of the League asked the United Nations (UN) Security Council to provide a no-fly zone to protect opposition forces from the military power of the Muammar Gaddafi regime. In other words, the League recognized the need for foreign intervention in the Libyan case, but it entrusted that task to the UN. In contrast, the League distanced itself from the request for international intervention in Syria, perhaps realizing it had made an error in the case of Libya. However, the situation in Yemen has provided the ideal opportunity again to disregard the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.

The idea of a unified Arab force coincided with the growing phenomenon of terrorism in the Arab region. The Secretary General of the League, Nabil Al Arabi, requested the need to activate the joint Arab defence treaty. President el-Sisi also put forward the idea of establishing a unified Arab force as an urgent necessity. Although the discussion of these ideas was vital in view of the worsening danger of terrorism in a number of Arab countries and the possibility of that extending to more of them, thereby threatening regional stability, security and integrity, the activation of the defence treaty may encounter difficulties. This is especially since there are some who regard cases of terrorism as an internal matter that does not apply to the treaty. Moreover, previous attempts to enforce the treaty faced real difficulties essentially due to the ruling Arab governments’ excessive adherence to the concept of national sovereignty at the expense of the concept of Arab national security. In addition, the concept of the ‘modern nation state’ is absent in its conventional sense in many Arab countries, since there is a dual authority in some countries, a de facto illegitimate authority in other countries and a real challenge to the existing authority in the remaining countries. The same situation applies to the idea of setting up a joint Arab force since its relationship with the Security Council and the rules contained in the Charter of the United Nations on the use of armed force constitutes a problem that requires some investigation.

On the other hand, the Arab media has played a role in inflaming tensions, differences and disputes, and even Arab–Arab conflicts. The material the media broadcasted in the context of crises distorted basic concepts of nationalism and helped to misrepresent the images shown to the Arab people. For example, the Al Jazeera channel continued its role in stoking the dispute between Egypt and Qatar because of the latter’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood after they were ousted from power in Egypt. The Egyptian media had a role in Egypt’s dispute with Hamas, particularly after June 2013 (Abd al-Halim 2015; Ahmad 2014a), and one of the Moroccan media stations also caused a diplomatic row between Egypt and Morocco.

The growing instability and the dangers of separation that have affected the Arab countries offered an ideal environment for the worsening foreign, both regional and international, infiltration into the Arab regional system.

The flow of fighters or mercenaries to these conflict-ridden countries, especially in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq, was a pretext for further intervention by some regional powers and their own penetration into the Arab regional system. For example, the Arab
League’s decisions regarding Libya offered the legal justification and political cover for NATO’s intervention in that country. Similarly, the Arab regional system faces two regional projects for hegemony. The first is the Iranian project, and this has achieved specific results in gaining positions of influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The second is the Turkish project to penetrate the Arab world by means of its economic achievements and put itself forward as a model of economic development and democracy that should be imitated.

These developments in 2014 resulted in undermining the remaining corners of the Arab regional system. However, the continuing aggravation of conditions in the system, particularly in light of the escalation of the Houthis in Yemen in the first months of 2015, prepared the conditions for new Arab responses represented mainly by ‘Operation Decisive Storm’ and the approval of the summit to establish a joint Arab force. There was near unanimous agreement on these actions since the only exceptions to this position were two countries, or at most, three countries.

The Arab Summit was held in Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt from 26 to 28 March in conditions in which the regional peace of many countries was under threat in an unprecedented way. The intensification of the challenges, internally and externally, had a positive impact in determining the position of the summit on some important issues. Most notably, it passed a number of decisions on the concept of safeguarding national Arab security and openly referred to the extent of the threats and risks surrounding it, as well as the necessity for joint Arab action to confront these dangers and preserve the entity of the Arab region and its regional integrity.

**Domestic conditions in Arab Spring countries**

There were constitutional, legal and political developments in the countries that experienced popular uprisings and revolutions, which are known as the Arab Spring countries, namely Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. These countries have seen a continuation along the trajectory of the main developments of 2013 and in the course of establishing the systematic constitutional and legal structure of the political process.

Firstly, this was in fact the year of constitutional developments in these countries. Egypt and Tunisia produced their constitutions and held a referendum on them before they entered into force. However, the full application of these constitutions required the issuing of a series of laws so that contradictions between the constitutions and the political reality do not arise. The entry of the Houthis into the capital Sana’a led to the dismissal of the draft Yemeni constitution which the special committee had finished formulating from its development stage, and had already sent it to the director of the president’s office. In Tunisia and Egypt, the complications of the situation in Libya originally prevented the completion of the draft constitutions and this led to the fate of these two constitutions being surrounded by ambiguity due to the nature of the balances of power between the political actors and the direction taken by the political conflict and interventions in the geographical neighbourhood and the international forces influencing them.3

These constitutional developments are associated with the active movement to issue constitutional declarations and laws in these countries. This opened the discussion about some of the plans for the laws that regulate the activities of vital sectors, such as laws for the organization for legislative elections and the establishment of civilian groups and their work, or laws to confront worsening phenomena, such as terrorism. Efforts also continued to try to change some laws that had been in effect since 2013.
and were associated with organizing the practice of certain political rights, such as the right to demonstrate.

Secondly, while both Tunisia and Egypt held presidential elections, the first also successfully completed elections for the Assembly of Representatives in October 2014, in accordance with the closed proportional list system with high percentages of voting (Feuer 2014). In Egypt, the ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court resulted in invalidating the election law to stop the elections which were scheduled to begin in March 2015 and led to a review of the election law and the law for the division of electoral districts in order to avoid legal fault which was referred to in the court’s ruling. Libya conducted its legislative elections in June 2014, but the declaration of the results has not been resolved except for 188 seats out of 200, and that was due to the complexities of the security situation and the accelerated pace of political violence. It is worth mentioning that the local council and municipal elections have not begun in Tunisia and Egypt and were not completed in Libya.

Thirdly, it is certain that in 2014 there was a decline in the presence of the Islamist current (specifically the Muslim Brotherhood) in the political scene after the second wave of the Egyptian revolution was launched in that direction in 2013. Under such a decline, the Salafist movement with its various branches is the candidate to fill this void on the religious side.

While the process of democratic development in the Arab Spring countries was affected severely by the escalating wave of political violence and the priority given to security at the expense of democracy, the ending of the state of political polarization being seen in those countries is the only guarantee to achieving a balance between the two elements mentioned.

**Domestic conditions in the remaining Arab countries**

Beyond the Arab Spring, the most significant internal political developments and interactions in the rest of the Arab countries revolved around seven main axes:

- First, there were constitutional and legal developments relating to political life. These were generally linked to the expansion of the powers of the independent elections authority, the reform of some of the constitutional articles, the issuing of new laws to combat terrorism, the change in existing laws and the issuing of lists of terrorist organizations.
- Second, presidential, legislative and municipal elections took place in several Arab countries under a state of political polarization. These elections resulted in the formation of political parties and the boycott by main opposition powers, such as in Algeria, Mauritania and Bahrain. Similarly, the opposition party powers in Sudan announced their boycott of the presidential and parliamentary elections which took place in April 2015. The path of boycotting elections is important proof of the absence of an agreement between the key actors on the rules for the political game. This is one of the fundamental issues relating to the process of democratic transition. Consensus on the organized rules and the frameworks for the political process and the commitment to them in practice will strengthen trust in them on the part of the various parties, as well as paving the way to achieving peacefully the principle of power rotation. It is also notable that the boycott of elections by the opposition parties and powers in these cases had no significant impact on the benefits of these elections as the
boycotters failed to rally broad sectors of the electorate into adopting their stance. As a result, the boycotters isolated themselves and ended up outside the elected institutions, thus losing the chance to exercise political influence from within. However, they did not have the ability to challenge the ruling governments in any serious way through their appeals to the Arab public.

- Third, the interactions of the political process revealed that several countries, especially those ruled by republican systems, are currently experiencing a double dilemma represented by the existence of problematic ruling governments, on the one hand, and a disarrayed and disunited opposition, on the other hand. Even if they possess legitimacy via elections or the ballot box, these ruling governments mostly lack ‘the legitimacy to implement’. This is only realized through the ability and efficacy of governments to confront the problems and challenges facing society, to provide the minimum public commodities and services to their citizens, at the forefront of which is national security. In contrast, the opposition parties and powers are suffering from fragmentation and division. This limits their ability to coordinate themselves for the sake of effectively influencing the political scene and putting themselves forward as a convincing alternative that can compete for electoral benefits. Aside from that, most of these powers and parties are unable or too weak to renew their intellectual and political discourse.

Some of the political interactions have been connected to the experiences and practices of the national dialogue between the ruling governments and the opposition, as has happened in Bahrain, Sudan, Mauritania and Algeria, but this has largely resulted in frustration and failure. This is important proof that the relationship between the ruling authority and the opposition in the vast majority of the Arab countries is founded on the ‘zero game’ (where neither side has options) and not on the basis of offering mutual concessions and accepting compromises. This is confirmed by the absent or weak commitment of the political parties and powers, whether in rule or in opposition, to democratic values and the rules for their application. These include accepting pluralism and different ideas, visions and interests, respecting the will of the electorate, following negotiation methods and bargaining to solve political conflicts. The outcome of this mainly turns the dialogue between the ruling authority and the opposition into a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ which does not end in success. In any case, this situation cannot be understood in isolation from the absent or weak culture of democracy in the Arab countries, on the one hand, and the crisis of the political elites, whether in rule or in opposition, on the other.

- Fourth, the acts of political violence and terrorism witnessed in most Arab countries to varying degrees have confirmed the truth of the interrelationship and interconnectedness between the internal and the external. The political and security developments in many of these countries had a discernible effect on what happened in other countries and also influenced some of the regional and international developments. For example, the internal conflicts in Somali, Sudan, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq can only be understood in relation to regional and international interventions. Similarly, these conflicts influenced and were influenced in turn by the political and security developments in other Arab countries. IS extended its presence in both Syria and Iraq, and the war launched against this organization has, and still has, reverberations on politics and security in many other Arab countries. The developments raise two important issues, namely that the existence of some Arab countries continues to be
threatened by the slide towards the category of failed states, or rather that they are threatened by fragmentation into separate political entities and the expanding role of violent non-state political actors (Ibrahim 2014). The cross-border extremist terrorist organizations, above all IS, are considered the most conspicuous embodiment of this phenomenon. These two issues are regarded as a source of fuel for the declining state, or lack of security and stability in the region.

- The fifth axis is civil society and its relationship to the state. The situation of civil society varies from one Arab country to another with regard to the extent of its effectiveness, the most important public issues with which it is associated and its type of relationship with the state. Despite the presence of these variations, the performance of civil society in Arab countries is, nevertheless, mostly characterized by studies as weak and fragile. That is for many reasons, some related to the subjective flaws and problems afflicting these organizations, such as internal disputes and splits, the lack of commitment to democracy in managing their affairs, lack of funding, weak institutional and professional abilities, and some organizations’ complete reliance on foreign funding. This puts them in a position of being doubted and questioned by the ruling authorities.

- Sixth, civil–military relationships have seen a group of developments. In Lebanon, the vacant presidential post and the many internal political and sectarian affinities and divisions have meant that the Lebanese Army, despite its modest military capacity, remains the only cohesive institution in the state. This unites the different sects and undertakes a prominent role in resisting extremist and terrorist organizations like IS and the Al-Nusra Front. In Mauritania, a crucial development took place in the structure of the military institution, changing it into various armies and brigades, and a growing number of generals and colonels. This led to the breakup of the centres of authority, power and leadership inside the military body which is weakening the political role of the military institution. In Algeria, the army is regarded as the most important institution in influencing political affairs, although behind the scenes any arrangements concerning political disputes cannot be made away from the army’s role and influence.

- Lastly, the seventh axis is represented by public policies and their ensuing problems and distortions. This may be at the level that these policies are made, implemented or evaluated, or how their results are taken into account. It is possible to distinguish here between the Arab Spring countries and the remaining countries. On the one hand, the GCC states possess excess financial funds and potential that differ in amounts from one country to another. This enables them to finance their public policies within acceptable limits in the worst conditions, thus realizing a kind of stability in offering public goods and services to their citizens. On the other hand, the rest of the Arab countries, with the exception of Algeria, do not possess this advantage. This has a negative impact on the efficacy of their public policies in tackling the social and economic challenges that they face.

It is worth mentioning that the comparative analysis of the Arab countries, which vary between monarchies and republics, reveals that internal political developments in the monarchies during 2014–15 were linked to greater stability. Hence, these have not seen any violent developments or unrest in contrast to the republics. For example, the process of political succession in Saudi Arabia was carried out quickly and calmly, and in Morocco, the government under the Party of Justice and
Development has obviously normalized its relationship with the monarchy. In contrast, the position of president in Lebanon has been vacant since May 2014. The elections that took place in states like Algeria and Mauritania were boycotted by some of the main political opposition parties and powers and hampered by sharp divisions among the ranks of the political elites in many of the republics. The monarchies were more stable from a security viewpoint compared with the conflicts and disengagements seen in republics such as Lebanon, Sudan, Somalia and others.

**Economic conditions**

As concluded above, armed conflicts within a single country have worsened, as have the economies of the Arab oil-producing countries as an effect of the collapse in oil prices in 2014 (ESCWA 2014). In general, the political trends observed by the reports of recent years on the state of the Arab nation have continued to be the same. One example of this is that the GCC countries remain the centre of development in the region. Political instability, social unrest and armed conflicts still hinder economic activity in the majority of Arab countries despite Gulf assistance to redress some of the indirect effects relating to the shortage in the flow of resources in a number of these countries, particularly in Egypt in 2013 and 2014.

Similarly, economic dependence on the rentier sector has continued despite the fact that the share of petroleum revenues from the total revenue fell from 74.8% in 2012 to 71.5% in 2013. Oil accounts for more than 60% of exports and 80% of general financial revenues on average in the Gulf countries. Even in the non oil-producing countries, a rentier sector has emerged, such as the dependence on the revenue from the Suez Canal in Egypt and the remittances from workers abroad in the case of other countries. That is equivalent to the non-dependence on tax revenues as a source for public expenditure in spite of the increase in spending from 15.6% of the total revenue in 2012 to 17.1% in 2013 (League of Arab States et al. 2014).

Furthermore, there has been continuing exposure to foreign economies with the increase in the overall external public debt in the Arab countries, many of which have resorted to foreign loans to fund the financial deficit. This problem has been aggravated by the cautious financial policy of the advanced industrial nations, especially those in the Eurozone, reflecting their declining ability to provide assistance to the Arab countries. The fall in the exchange rate of the US dollar against both the euro and pound sterling has affected the rise in the debit value of the euro and sterling valued against the dollar.

The failure of public policies to fulfil the essential services for citizens has also continued. Most Arab countries have failed to provide employment opportunities for their youth as a result of the lower standards of education, shortfall in skills necessary for entering and competing in the workplace, and the lax management and weak absorptive capacity of the private sector. This situation in the private sector is attributable to the challenges it faces that are related to the work environment and the existence of distortions in the domestic work market, as is the case of the Gulf countries where there is a high rate of foreign workers. That has led to the growth of the informal sector and self-employment in the unofficial economy in the least developed Arab countries, like Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and Yemen. The more developed Arab economies, like Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, are characterized by a surplus labour force resulting from the lack of growth in gross domestic product (GDP) at rates that would allow the creation of opportunities for employment. That
has been accompanied by a rise in rates of poverty and abject poverty since the start of 2012 in the eastern Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria), caused by the direct and immediate effect of political conflicts and unrest on the prospects for development, and the unequal distribution of the fruits of development and wealth among sectors of the population, especially in the Egyptian countryside and internal regions in Tunisia. The highest levels of poverty were recorded in the least developed Arab states at 21.6% in 2012, having been 13.9% in 1990. All this has had consequences in the sphere of social justice and on equal opportunities for the poor and those on low incomes to make use of health and water services.

Political conditions have had far-reaching effects on the performance of the economies that saw internal wars and the spread of violent acts (Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya). Due to these developments, the number of displaced people has risen in the Arab countries and outside them, reaching 7.2 million in 2013, most of whom were in the eastern Arab countries. However, the countries hosting refugees have faced multiple economic challenges, particularly as they were unprepared to meet their most basic needs. This has forced refugees to accept work at lower wages and in harsher conditions than those of their contemporaries in these host countries. Moreover, this has created more pressure on these countries’ economic performance, social cohesion and internal stability (League of Arab States 2014, 22–26).

**Conditions of youth**

The youth population in the region is described as the influential force in the Arab future. They have been categorized as the ‘hidden Arab capital’ or the true ‘energy’ source for the Arab countries. The youth population is playing a greater role in Arab communities by demanding change and reform or revolution. Since 2011, the pressures imposed on them have been gradually increasing due to the growing internal and external challenges faced by the Arab countries.

The youth population comprises around 20% of the total population in the Arab countries, and this is the highest percentage in the world compared with the advanced countries where young people account for only 13% (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2013). The majority of Arab youth suffer from increasing rates of unemployment and poverty as well as lower rates of education. This has led to their growing alienation, with some turning to satellite channels where they fall prey to extremist and terrorist currents, while many others are thinking of immigrating. However, they are joining a wide global movement by the steady rise in their use of the internet and social media, especially in the Gulf countries.

It is noticeable that in the constitutional and legal framework relating to the representation of youth, there are trends in the Arab constitutions which were drafted after 2011. These specify the percentages for the representation of youth in legislative and executive positions. There was an escalation in the number of young people who took up leadership positions in state institutions in the republics, or in increasing the role of the young leaders in the monarchies. The organizational framework concerned with youth affairs in the Arab countries is represented by 13 ministries designated for youth and sports, six councils and bodies dedicated to taking care of the youth, and three ministries which include youth in their portfolio. Moreover, there are committees concerned with youth issues in the legislative and parliamentary bodies. There is also a noticeable growth in interest in the state of national policy for youth in keeping with this trend in countries all over the world.
The ruling regimes were in some confusion about choosing the best method to deal with the youth movements and activists. On the one hand, they coupled assimilation and containment and, on the other, pressure and intimidation (Wardani 2014). The situation of the youth in the institutions of the Arab governments, specifically the role of the council of ministers for Arab youth and sport, shows there is a rising but superficial interest in empowering youth in the council’s decisions and in the declarations of the Arab summit, but that interest has not been accompanied by efforts to translate those words into reality. An analysis of the activities and programmes supervised by the council reveals that they are characterized by repetitiveness and stereotyping while lacking any point of reference. This is particularly the case as the youth did not participate in the design or implementation of these programmes and the governments control the selection of the youth who participate in these programmes. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the Arab policy document for youth and sport issued by the GCC in 1983, and partially amended in 2001, represents a step forward in formulating a policy that deals with youth issues in their various aspects, and was the forerunner for the issuing of similar documents in some Arab countries. In this context, attempts to introduce youth representation at the council level and in their arts committees have taken place, but have not met with success. However, the youth activities organized by Arab civil society have been marked by a wide space for freedom and creativity and a larger role for the youth to plan and implement them. Through these activities, there is an Arab youth camp organized by the Arab National Congress every two years.

As for the role of the youth in future, two fundamental outcomes are emerging. The first is that despite the progress achieved in some areas, the situation of the Arab youth will be dominated by a state of frustration due to the existence of a number of challenges found in internal conditions, in the institutional environment for the machinery of the Arab government relating to the youth, and in the rise of new and previously non-existent issues. The most important of these issues are extremism and terrorism and the youth’s attraction to organizations that adopt these ideas and work outside the umbrella of legitimacy. Secondly, there are opportunities that can be turned to advantage, the most important of which is that the leadership of the ruling governments should realize the difficulty of returning to the conditions that existed prior to 2011. That is in light of the enormous progress in communications and information, and the likely changes in the structure of the elites over the coming years, the effects of globalization, and the increasing openness of the Arab youth to the global youth movements calling for reform, change and democracy. The ruling elites should be aware that the first line of defence for their stability is to formulate a new social contract between themselves and the youth, founded on deepening the principles of wise governance and democracy and youth empowerment.

Science and technology

The state of science and technology in the Arab countries illustrates the role of science in achieving comprehensive development and preserving security. Scientific issues influence the entire national economy and Arab national security and represent one of the greatest challenges to those countries in view of their lack of awareness of the strong connection between science and the sovereignty and security of the state (Zahlan 2012). The advanced nations have realized this and allocated enormous sums for scientific research. The United States, China and Japan spend more than US$1 trillion annually on research and development (R&D), whereas the Arab
countries, whose population far surpasses that of the United States or Japan, only spend a few billion dollars annually.

In addition to financial support, successful scientific activity requires support from government and society. The outputs and efficacy of research institutions are based on their openness to knowledge, international cooperation, and political and social engagement in the field of R&D, and the provision of suitable management systems to support scientific institutions. This is what the Arab countries have lacked and has caused their backwardness compared with other developed countries. For example, no Arab country has established national scientific organizations to enable the organic integration of their scientists and economies into the global system. Arab scientists participate widely as individuals in research activities in the industrialized countries, but their abilities and skills are not being integrated into the national economy and the Arab economy. However, though the number of Arab universities has increased to more than 500 in 2014, their academic standards have also dropped.

Attention should also be drawn to the fact that countries which support scientific research benefit from it in all fields. For example, there are economic benefits in terms of food production, health standards, combating epidemics, military capabilities, living standards, employment and the quality of education. However, the Arab countries have failed to adopt science as the basis for their source of power. Although they possess vast natural resources and enjoy a great cultural heritage, these countries are divided and separated in numerous ways and unable to unite for the sake of the common good. Furthermore, they are incapable of controlling their resources, as they do not possess the necessary scientific foundations.

One of the most conspicuous examples of this is the insufficient commitment to and interest in the issues of water and water resource management. This is despite the fact that the technologies to re-saturate aquifers with water, manage them, and improve their usage are known and widespread, and that the skills for this specialization are also common. Likewise, Arab industrial investments have not contributed to the development of local sciences and engineering or their organizations because of the deficient policies that rely on foreign labourers and international contractors and the lack of efforts by any organization to build local capacity. This would enable Arab countries to benefit from their national investments and offer their own citizens employment opportunities.

At the national level, science can enable society to guarantee the necessary tools and resources to maintain progress and security since it may offer a significant contribution to the development of the Arab countries. By adopting conflict resolution methodology and encouraging its use, these countries can find solutions to the conflicts between them. However, they must strive to escape from their state of technological dependency and to move towards the modernization of their industrial societies and the indigenization of their technologies. They must also develop advanced skills at a global level in financial issues, corporate mergers, and creative and regenerative competition. This can be accomplished through policies that radically transform rural and urban areas, create employment opportunities to use natural resources and human capital productively, improve the agricultural sector quickly in order to provide foods at lower prices, and provide clean water and safe sanitation systems to ensure the healthy and productive lives of the workforce.

The adoption of unified Arab policies to deal with these activities through joint cooperation would be beneficial to all Arab countries. For example, the aluminium
manufactured in one country could be exchanged to manufacture the components to make windows and doors in other Arab countries. Some countries may be more equipped than others to manufacture complex construction equipment while others may be better at producing raw materials. Therefore, such cooperation will lead to local Arab needs being met given that the Arab region may become home to about 1 billion people by the end of this century.

Digital content

The state of digital content in the Arab region is covered through five themes.

- The first is the reality of the Arab information and communications environment and the level of e-readiness. The extent of this is determined by two sets of indicators: for the infrastructure of networks and information; and for human capacity and skills. These are essentially linked to the size of a country’s economic and financial resources, and therefore the Gulf Arab countries occupy first place in this respect (Al-Razu 2012).

- The second theme is the level of dissemination of the internet and its services. This is reliant on the extent of the communications infrastructure and citizens’ level of acceptance of the internet, as well as the availability of gateways to the internet and the size of the communications package offered by internet servers. There are higher numbers of internet users in the Arab countries, especially in the Gulf, compared with many other countries in the world.

- The third theme is the Arab presence in the information space. A huge revolution has occurred in the size of Arab usage of social media sites, at the forefront of which is Facebook. Egypt is ahead of other Arab countries with 13 million users, followed by Saudi Arabia with 5.5 million and Morocco with 5.2 million. Twitter has also seen a growing acceptance, especially during the Arab uprisings and revolts. The number of active users reached 3.7 million across the Arab region in the first quarter of 2013, and Saudi Arabia had the biggest number of Twitter users with numbers exceeding 1.9 million (MADAR 2012). Moreover, the use of online blogs has become widespread in the Arab countries since they offer users an easy and flexible environment in which to share opinions and ideas as well as the opportunity to spread the discourse to a much wider circle of users whilst avoiding the rising costs of printing and publishing.

- The fourth theme is the practice and application of electronic governance (e-governance) among the Arab governments. They have founded websites for their different ministries and institutions and this online presence has been developed by the creation of gateways storing many of the websites and digital services offered by these governments. The UAE, Bahrain and Morocco lead the rest of the Arab countries in the field of e-governance.

- The fifth theme is the review and evaluation of Arabic digital content. Arabic websites are the largest producers of digital content, followed by social media networks and then Arabic forums. As for producing the material of this content, Egypt is the highest producer, then Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It is noticeable that the subjects of this content go beyond cultural and intellectual topics, with 8.3 million pages on these, after which the many other topics include social sciences, law and politics (Marib 2014).
The Arab countries have shown increasing interest in the issue of Arab digital content. Arab scientific institutions have held conferences dealing with this issue from technical and economic viewpoints, developed plans to increase the production of Arabic content and exerted maximum efforts to advance this in quantity and content. However, all these attempts and efforts have not successfully filled the gap in digital content.

A successful plan for the path towards advancing digitization and enriching Arabic content cannot be written by one party, sector or Arab government without others. This is because the size of the work aimed at meeting the requirements to implement this plan demands an exceptional effort, the success of which cannot be guaranteed by one party, whatever material, technical and human potential they may bring. The plan for this anticipated path will need a solid institutional effort based on short-, medium- and long-term plans for its performance. In order to achieve this, the required approach also needs a critical review of the nature of the Arab digital presence, specifying the most important gaps in it. To start with, the most significant deficiencies of the digital system for the Arabic language and material for the Arabic content are the absence of short- and long-term Arab visions for dealing with the new information and economic resource and the unclear nature of the appropriate mechanisms for working with it, the fragmentation of the tools used in one Arab country or another, and limiting the size of the challenges before it. This has turned the initiatives adopted by the Arab countries into isolated islands that cannot be bridged by a fruitful connection and are lacking the measures and fixtures that would allow them to benefit from the serious and ambitious initiatives of other Arab countries.

Palestine

The book also studies the most significant cases of political hotspots in the Arab region, starting with Palestine. Almost all Palestinians agree that 2014 was one of the worst years experienced in their conflict. The humanitarian crisis in Palestine worsened in the face of Israeli intransigence and political stagnation. The start of this year saw the failure of Palestinian–Israeli negotiations, which had been resumed for nine months since mid-2013 under American supervision. The government of Benjamin Netanyahu set out to evade previously agreed Palestinian demands as retaliation against the Palestinians’ request for membership in a number of international organizations and treaties. Therefore, Washington sought to lower the ceiling of goals under the so-called ‘Framework Agreement’, but it also failed to achieve this aim. Israel tried, with the support of the United States, to extend the negotiations after the end of the nine months, and this was unopposed by the Palestinians. The latter made nine demands, chief of which was a letter of acknowledgement from Netanyahu’s government that the borders of 4 June 1967 would form the basis for these negotiations. In addition, they demanded the release of the fourth group of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails and withdrawals from the West Bank and elsewhere. However, Israel did not respond to these demands at all (Abd al-Nasir 2014).

In the middle of the year, an agreement for national reconciliation was ratified, specifically between the two movements of Hamas and Fatah. However, its practical application was not made possible due to the so-called ‘harassment’ between the two parties after the announcement of a unity government. This was caused by the heavy burdens that the government had to bear and its inability to meet most of them, in addition to the challenges and obstacles imposed by the Israeli side. These difficulties continued as they were, leading to a long and strongly worded argument and debate.
between the two poles of the reconciliation. Each of the two parties continued to emphasize its factional autonomy to their own organization, while looking to break free of internal, regional and international factors, and competing with the other side to try to score points for their own benefit (Nassar 2014).

At this time also, Israeli occupation forces stormed the West Bank under the pretext of searching for three missing settlers. That was followed by provocative actions around al-Aqsa mosque and compound. A month later, in July, Israeli forces launched an all-out attack on the Gaza Strip that lasted 51 days and ended in a terrible human and physical catastrophe (Anwar 2014).

The negative state of national and foreign politics exacerbated the already fragile social and economic conditions for the Palestinians in the occupied territories and in their refugee countries. The local wheels of production stopped almost completely in the Gaza Strip because the blockade had squeezed it to the point of suffocation and the Israeli war damaged many of its productive units. The occupied West Bank was pushed into a state of dependency and survival on foreign aid, which was provided for political purposes. The Palestinians entered a spiral of need and abject poverty after most of their personal and social security disappeared in the host countries with unstable politics and security. The greatest crisis was the total blockade faced by the residents of Yarmouk Camp in Damascus when fighting intensified between the Syrian Army and armed opposition groups reached the camp. This prevented normal life in its most basic sense, and the situation was repeated in April 2015 as a result of the attacks on this camp by IS.

The same situation holds true for the Palestinians inside Israel who have been under Israeli control since 1948. With the exception of the laws, legislation and decisions aimed at eliminating their presence and confining them to the furthest borders, the most dangerous and most widespread plan this year was what was known as the plan to Judaize the state which was passed by the Knesset on its first reading. The passing of this plan in its recent form fulfills the Israeli desire to remove the right of return for Palestinian refugees and expand the racist, programmed and legalized practices against those inside Israel, ending with their subjugation to a state of apartheid.

On the international level, 2014 saw a momentum to recognize the state of Palestine by virtue of successive recognitions from five European parliaments, beginning with official recognition by Sweden. Despite the symbolic nature of these recognitions, they advanced the culture of the international community towards establishing a Palestinian state. Hence, after that there should only be prompt efforts to liberate this state. However, it is not a simple matter for the Israelis to accept since they consider it a threat to their own state and must deal seriously with these recognitions. Their starting point is to make Europe the main economic partner of Israel since the matter may develop into a position of favouring the Palestinians by other European organizations and bodies.

With the failure of negotiations, President Mahmud Abbas announced that the Palestinian side would seek to return its bid for statehood to the UN. Abbas was encouraged to do that by the regional and international domains which, in the second half of the year, were ready to accept the Palestinian discourse. This was especially the case after the succession of European parliamentary recognitions of the Palestinian state and the clear Arab support for the Palestinian movement. However, Israel rejected the Palestinian’s choice, considering it to be a unilateral move. The resolution presented by the Palestinians failed to obtain the majority needed to pass in the Security Council on 30 December. That provoked anger among the Palestinians and pushed them to hasten their signing of 19 international agreements, as well as the statute for the
International Criminal Court (ICC), thus carrying out their threat to do this. In fact, Palestine became a member of the ICC and this move grants it the ability to prosecute Israeli officials before the international judiciary for crimes committed against the Palestinian people, including occupation, settlements, destruction, demolitions, aggression, assassinations and imprisonment.

Thus, we can say that 2014 opened its doors to a battle that was bitter to negotiate and ended with the failure to achieve a resolution. The year closed with a diplomatic, political, and legal battle between the Palestinian and Israeli sides. It is difficult to know how this battle will end.

Syria

The situation in Syria in 2014 saw more problems and crises that came with the fighting, destruction and the forcing of its population into migration, displacement and asylum. With regard to political and social developments, the number of victims in Syria reached more than 2 million, including those killed and seriously injured. During the first two months of 2015, the crisis resulted in the deaths of 10,000 people, bringing the total number killed to 210,000. The situation of the Syrian refugees deteriorated in the host countries due to harsh conditions, gross abuses and weak international aid. That was in addition to the measures undertaken by the government of Lebanon to restrict Syrians from seeking refuge there as well as closing the Syrian–Lebanese border across the mountains in Arsal. This followed Hezbollah’s intervention in the Syria crisis where it helped the Bashar al-Assad regime to regain most of al-Qalamoun from opposition control after capturing the city of al-Qusayr on the Assi River in the countryside of Homs. These actions all contributed to heightening the crisis and continuing to ignite its fires.

While many observers expected positive results for the Geneva II peace conference in January 2014, the conference proceedings and the non-cessation of hostilities over its duration constituted a major failure that only compounded the negative effects for the future of Syria (Ahmad 2014b). Afterwards, Syria held presidential elections despite the regime’s lack of control over all areas of the country. There was also opposition from the Arab and international communities – given that the conditions were not suitable for fair elections, it was unfeasible to guarantee Arab or international observers and there was a dearth of candidates who were known politically and throughout Syria. These elections resulted in a victory for al-Assad, further shaking the legitimacy of the regime, and leading to the resignation of Lakhdar Brahimi as the UN envoy on Syria and the absence of Faruq al-Sharaa, al-Assad’s vice-president who was responsible for talks with the opposition parties.

Syria’s economy entered a dark new phase. The wheels of agricultural and industrial production stopped almost completely. Gas and oil production also came to a halt and transport lines were damaged. The value of the Syrian currency (pound or lira) fell and brought about increased costs of living and of most basic food and health necessities. The educational system was also badly affected. School buildings were turned into military camps and fortifications and the majority suffered damage. The percentage of students enrolling in primary education dropped to less than 50%. This will create a hidden generation of illiteracy in Syrian society, with unforeseen consequences. Moreover, there has been a decline in the standard of university education because a large number of lecturers are unable to travel to their universities or have left the country. An increasing number of young people are also fleeing, fearing that they
will be drafted into national military service. They are seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, and some are taking huge risks to travel across the sea to European countries.

There have been changing conditions and fluctuations for the parties in the conflict and their relationships with their allies who support them politically, financially, and militarily with weapons and fighters. The al-Assad government, supported mainly by Iran and Russia, announced it had military assistance from Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in the military operation to try to regain control of opposition areas in Quneitra and Hawran. This forced an alliance of the opposition which presented a complaint to the UN Security Council demanding the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria and a prohibition on intervention from any foreign fighters to maintain the principle of sovereignty.

The opposition became more dispersed among numerous groups after the failure of Geneva II, Brahimi’s resignation and the succession as UN special envoy by Staffan de Mistura, as well as the spread of IS which occupied the province of Raqqa and parts of the provinces of Dayr al-Zawr and Hasakah (Al-Jazirah). Moreover, there ceased to be support from the United States and nations friendly to Syria due to their preoccupation with the international alliance against IS and the liberation of Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), in addition to their concern about the effects of the Ukrainian issue on Europe. Some attribute the cause of this breakup of the opposition groups to the interference of the sides who supported first their formation and operations. A breakup happened after the influence of a strong opposition organization had died instead of forming a collective political umbrella in order to support aid and living conditions in addition to providing protection and supplying weapons. This was a task that was expected of the National Council when it was first formed. In addition, the Syrian Free Army and the provisional government that formed the alliance had a very weak presence inside Syria, in contrast to the other groups and IS, even though they were much more moderate and civilized.

On the other hand, the Kurdish forces’ victory over IS and the recapture of Ayn al-Arab with the help of airstrikes by the international alliance led to a revival of Kurdish demands for autonomy in the north of Syria, along the lines of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (Tanir 2014). Consequently, an announcement was made about the formation of a new organization under the banner ‘Al-Jazirah (Hasaka) is Arab and Syrian’ that aimed to maintain the Arab and Syrian nature of Hasaka province and the unity of all Syrian lands.

As for international efforts, no tangible progress in this dire situation was attained by the many political initiatives which included the initiative by Staffan de Mistura (The Regional Center for Strategic Studies (RCSS) 2015), the Cordoba gathering, the Cairo conference, the Moscow meeting and UN resolutions. All these initiatives can be put in the context of their emphasis on a political solution in accordance with the declaration of Geneva I and on stopping the violence, killing and terrible destruction.

Based on the information above, the conclusion is that opportunities to solve the Syrian conflict have been missed, starting with the ineffective Security Council resolutions, the Geneva I declaration with its different interpretations and the failure of Geneva II, until the intervention by foreign forces and fighters and the arrival of IS, as well as the group Jabhat al-Nusra, who controlled large areas and fought against all opposition groups. All this indicates the negative results expected by the Syrian people and the countries of the region and the world. This means that, firstly, the Arab nations, whether in the framework of the Arab League or Arab bilateral relations, bear a great responsibility, particularly in the face of the dangers stirred up by plans for sectarian division that will mostly be to the benefit of Israel.
A binding resolution from the UN Security Council is needed to produce a solution that is compulsory and satisfactory to all parties, ends the fighting, preserves the unity of Syria and guarantees a just settlement for all the problems. This should achieve the aims and aspirations of the Syrian people in a democratic, developed country in which all elements coexist with each other, their neighbours and the world. This is the goal on which hopes are resting.

**Iraq**

In 2014, Iraq passed through two key developments that determined its network of political and security interactions, in addition to the nature of its relations with regional and international powers. These developments were the parliamentary elections on 30 April and the announcement by IS of the establishment of an ‘Islamic state’ after its seizure of Mosul on 10 June (Mujahid 2014; Sulayman 2014).

The results of the parliamentary elections revealed that the sectarian nature of the political system in Iraq still persists. Shi’i forces dominated, despite the differing personalities brought by these elections. This means that the institutionalization of the election process in Iraq will not necessarily produce a change in the balance of power there in future. However, the IS declaration of an ‘Islamic state’ was a motivating factor for the Iraqi powers to avoid entering a stage of political paralysis, as usually happened in the periods after parliamentary elections. Instead, these powers worked towards reaching a mutual consensus that was expressed in the political agreement ratified on 9 September and allowed the formation of a new government, under the presidency of Haydar al-Abadi, that would be able to confront IS.

As for foreign relations, 2014 saw a relative improvement in Iraq’s relationships with the Gulf states and the United States which supported the formation of its new government and helped in its fight against IS. Additionally, Iran’s political, economic and security influence expanded in Iraq, whereas relations between the central government and Turkey became strained due to the latter’s position towards the regional government in Kurdistan and its desire to strengthen economic relations with it.

The developments in the political and security situation in Iraq in the coming period will be tied to the ability of al-Abadi’s government to commit to the political agreement since this is considered a ‘safety belt’ for the Iraqi state. Should the government not adhere to the clauses relating to the demands for the Kurdish forces, this will make these forces less cooperative with the government in its war against IS and more eager to strengthen the independence of the Kurdistan region. Similarly, if the government does not apply the clauses relating to the representation of Sunnis in state institutions, this will perpetuate their exclusion and drive away one of the essential components of the Iraqi population, causing anger and rejection. This could make their society a suitable environment for IS and its counterparts, especially in light of the repeated violations, the ‘killing of identity’, burning of homes and destruction of properties perpetrated by some groups of the public in areas controlled by IS. One example of this is what took place after IS entered the city of Tikrit in March–April 2015.

The non-implementation of the political agreement will put Iraq into a political crisis, perhaps one more serious than the previous crisis which was responsible in part for the creation of IS and the extension of its control. This is especially as the political situation and the development of military operations at the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015 led to more independence for the Kurdistan region and other
provinces are expecting the same. Moreover, the political situation in Iraq is conditional on the ability of the central government in Baghdad, its supporters among the regional and international powers, and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces to defeat IS and completely recover the territory which it has taken control of, especially Tikrit and other neighbouring regions, and prepare to liberate Mosul. Furthermore, the government needs to guarantee the integration of the Sunni tribes into the security institutions.

Libya

The developments inside Libya revolved around several main axes (Ahmad 2014c):

- First, the crises of the internal situation worsened as a result of the political, organizational and military fragmentation into a regional basis. During the uprising of 17 February 2011, the rebels had formed military groups to confront Gaddafi’s security forces. As much as everyone was pleased by the multitude of popular armed groups, the dangers of this situation became apparent after the uprising was victorious in achieving its primary aim, namely to topple the regime. Thus, each city came to have its own army and the government was helpless when faced with the various forms of security breakdown caused by the militias who imposed their control over the Libyan scene. They restricted the government’s activity, and likewise the role of the General National Congress, in implementing the wishes of the militia leaders, most of which were contradictory and conflicting.

- Second, the political process and the coupling of the legislative and executive institutions ended in failure. This caused the General National Congress to divide into two prominent blocs. The first bloc represented what could be called the groups of political Islam, and the second bloc was metaphorically called ‘the liberals’. These were damaging affinities that led to much disagreement and hindered the work of the government. Consequently, a bloc was set up by members of the congress who supported the Islamist groups in forming another government, named the ‘national emergency government’. Thus, there were two governments and legislative councils in Libya and each accused the other of betrayal (Ali 2014).

- Third, the security vacuum had ramifications inside Libya and on neighbouring countries. In view of the vulnerability of the Libyan security institutions during the uprising and their subsequent weakening, the scene changed to war on the streets. The various militias took over the task of maintaining security instead of the official authorities, but they exploited their new status to expand their circles of power, prestige and wealth. These militias entered into many clashes against one another that occurred inside the same city or between cities, and they began to pose a major threat to neighbouring Arab countries.

- Fourth, there was the influence of Arab, regional and international roles. In contrast to what happened in the revolutions of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, Arab and non-Arab states rushed to intervene in the Libyan affair from the first days of its inception in the revolution of 17 February 2011. The Arab League in its meeting of 12 March adopted a resolution to support the Libyan revolt by imposing a no-fly zone banning war planes. The UN Security Council called for the adoption of a similar resolution that would be imposed by force. Two days later, the proposal was presented to the Security Council and on 17
March it passed Resolution 1973 which paved the way for the use of all means, including military force, to support the Libyan revolt. However, it was clearly apparent that what motivated those states were their own aims and interests. The aims they announced publicly did not intend the protection of Libyan civilians from Gaddafi’s tyranny as their main goal. It became clear that those states intervening in Libya did not have just one goal, meaning that the country fell victim to a regional struggle. This worked to inflame internal conflicts rather than help to reduce them, as those states wanted to achieve greater influence in the country after the fall of the Gaddafi regime (Sawani 2015).

- Fifth, there are scenarios for developing the situation. It is easy to say that the Libyan scene during 2015 will be in a state of overwhelming chaos. Nevertheless, this statement is only a general opinion that could happen sooner or later. The country has seen this situation during 2014 and so there are questions about this happening again. Therefore, the book focuses on the main factors determining developments in the Libyan scene and describes the situation of each of them. These factors are: (1) the state of the militias, (2) the role of other countries, (3) the presence and influence of IS, (4) democracy or the rebellion’s mission, (5) the role of the youth outside the militias, and (6) Libya in the case of statelessness.

In general, it seems that the scene that has prevailed in the latter half of 2014 will continue throughout 2015. Rather, it will be a filter for more congestion, tension, deterioration and complications. That is, unless a miracle happens at a time in which miracles are absent.

Yemen

Last but not least, the book presents an analysis of the ongoing internal developments in Yemen. The Yemeni scene is characterized by its revolutionary slogans, retaliatory acts, peaceful crowds, mirage of presidential and governmental performance, sharing of posts, no compromise in movement and action, theoretical programmes and visions, and dialogue by guns and force. The worst aspects of the Yemeni scene are that it is about revenge but not removal, and that it extends and expands power but does not rotate it. The ruler usually attempts to extend his political life and cling to power without fair elections. Thus, an armed movement emerges (the Houthis) which expands into many Yemeni regions and provinces, achieving this through the gun. Therefore, this scene has embraced numerous problems, the most important of which are: the presence of a legacy of retaliation, the disappearance of revolutionary action, the absence of rotation and the presence of internationalization, the narrowing of visions and the broadening of slogans, and the problem of half and not decisive actions and decisions.

Yemen currently includes several forces. There are the emerging and rising forces, such as the Houthi movement (also known as Ansar Allah) and the Southern Movement, and others like al-Qaeda. There are traditional forces who use the language of modernity (Al-Zahiri 2015), and share functions and posts, e.g. the Popular Committee parties and their allies and the Joint Meeting party and its partners. Some supporting forces are dispersed and polarized between the sides in varying numbers, like the tribes. Finally, there are forces that are ready but scattered and confused, such as the youth. The interactions between these forces are taking place in a precarious society that is marked as being tribal, politicized and loaded somewhat with the language of
political discussion and the war of ideas. Therefore, the political alliances between these forces are characteristically temporary and tactical, while lacking any strategic vision. The interests of society and the country are still absent from the goals of these alliances and their parties.

Furthermore, Yemen has suffered a comprehensive and complex political and social crisis. This was not only in the political system but also in the relationship between society and the state. It has been manifested in the estrangement of the state and the political system from society, and the fact that both of these did not represent the main actors existing in this society. That may be attributed to several causes, chief of which is that the government’s orientation lacks the credibility of adopting the core values of the democratic model. Hence, it makes attempts at distortion and deceiving society and is satisfied with conveying the form without essence or the structure without meaning. Despite the Yemenis’ imitation of the West and their choice of it for arbitration, nevertheless, they have failed to transfer the Western liberal democratic model but are attempting its ‘contextualization’ and ‘derivation’ in the stubborn Yemeni environment while expelling many of its values. Similarly, they have been incapable of preserving many of the positive Yemeni values. This has resulted in the weakness of both society and the state.

One of the most prominent events of 2014 was the fall of the Yemeni capital, Sana’a, at the hands of armed Houthis on 21 September. This revealed the emergence of indicators that the role of the state was absent and proof that there was a danger of separation. The most important of these indicators is the absence of any peaceful nature to the revolt of 11 February 2011 and the outbreak of violent confrontations between rivals, such that politicians turned into men of war, not political dignitaries. They have perfected the art of igniting conflicts and provocations and reproducing them, and are unable to make policy. Consequently, political and social life has become militarized and warlike, and even the gun is politicized (Al-Muwadda’ 2015).

On the other hand, the Yemeni scene has experienced what could be called ‘the struggle of legitimacies’. There is the legitimacy of consensus, legitimacy of revolution and the non-functioning legitimacy of the constitution. The first two have fought against each other and the legitimacy of consensus has won, for many reasons, including the fact that the revolt of 11 February was incomplete. However, these revolts prolong the lives of their enemies, granting them the opportunity to put their ranks in order, or rather entice them with resisting or aborting the revolt. Due to this, the Yemeni scene has been affected by the disease of ‘extension’. The president of consensus, Abd Rabbuh Mansur, has tried ‘extension’ for himself and tried to lengthen his political life through the slow implementation of the outcomes from the National Dialogue Conference. This has created an abnormal political situation since the transitional and temporary extension has become permanent and lasting. That results in the absence of any legitimacy to execute and perform, and the presence of the legitimacy of nonsense which in reality brings the legitimacy of illegitimacy.

Therefore, Yemen is facing two main scenarios. The first is the transitional scenario—one that is desired and available—which ends in what could be termed the constructive or renewing phase. In this, there is political trust not political mistrust, textual fulfilment not textual deception, truthful action not false talk, political might not military conflict, action for change not revengeful retaliation, and a national conscience instead of selfish behaviour. After this, the transition will take place to implementing the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference and turn to building a unified, modern and just Yemeni state. The second scenario is the unwanted one of fighting, rupture and
catastrophe. Yemen could be divided as a society and state, with the destruction of the temple or the ‘Yemeni barrier’ for those in it, through the collapse of the state and its breakup, and the creation of conflicting political entities coinciding at the same time.

Events have quickly pushed the second scenario to the forefront. On their part, the Houthis used their control over Sana’a as an introduction to increasing their demands and trying to impose their political control over all aspects of the state. The president of the republic and the prime minister were besieged and issued a new constitutional declaration. The Houthis made an alliance with former president Abdullah Saleh, which confirmed their control over the larger part of the Yemeni Army. Through this alliance, the Houthis began to expand southwards towards Aden and declared it the capital of the state after the president fled from there. The continuing advance of the Houthis towards the hills of Aden forced the president to leave the country for fear that he would be imprisoned and it prevented him from participating in the Arab Summit in Egypt on 28 March. As a response to the expansion of Houthi influence and the dismemberment of the state, the Saudis formed an alliance that included a number of Arab countries and launched what they called ‘Operation Decisive Storm’ in March 2015 to prevent the Houthis gaining complete control of Yemen. This operation also began to organize the tribes who rejected the Houthi rebellion, supplying them with weapons so that they could resist the Houthis.

No explanation is required about the danger that events in Yemen have created and how this has opened the door to different scenarios and expectations.

Conclusions
Based on the above analysis, what are the most important challenges that the Arab nation faces in 2015? We can point out the three main challenges:

- **The challenge of adaptation of the ruling regimes in some Arab countries.** These countries were able to maintain the cohesion of the institutions of the central authority. This was despite the repercussions of events in the political hotspots and the efforts by cross-border terrorist organizations to penetrate into other Arab countries. In order to achieve this adaptation, changes must be made to the public policies which these countries are pursuing. Likewise, they must change foreign policies to respond to changes in the international order and the changes to the balances of power within it. Non-adaptation could lead to a structural crisis taking place that would shake the legitimacy of these regimes, causing other Arab countries to join the group of political hotspots or ‘failed states’.

- **The challenge of reviving the institutions of the Arab regional order.** The role of these institutions must be activated in the case of internal conflicts and wars in many Arab countries, on the one hand, and there must be support for economic cooperation and coordination, on the other. It will not be of any benefit for these Arab efforts to be part of the American strategy or an implementation of some of its clauses. Nor will it be beneficial for these efforts to stoke the religious or sectarian disputes which are termed the ‘Sunni–Shi’i conflict’ by those in the West who are working to develop this. Many of our Arab rulers and intellectuals have fallen, intentionally and unintentionally, into the trap of accepting this misconception and using it as a tool for analyzing political developments. Nevertheless, the fact is that the revival of the sectarian loyalties and ethnic disputes is the fruit of the new American strategic plan. This plan began to be implemented
during the era of George W. Bush and his national security advisor and foreign minister, Condoleezza Rice, and was also carried out with the support of Arab parties. The American investigative journalist Seymour Hersch reported on the details of this plan during Bush’s presidency in a lengthy article for The New Yorker magazine (Hersh 2007).

Unfortunately, the concept of this sectarian conflict has proliferated among a number of officials and those in political parties and the media. Moreover, it has influenced the consciousness of citizens such that they behave politically according to ethnic and sectarian considerations. It is also unfortunate that a change in this situation will take a long time and requires a diverging political context.

The modern national state is founded upon a citizenship that guarantees to every citizen, without distinction, equality in their rights and duties. There is no requirement, in any case, that their ethnic and sectarian affiliations or loyalties should be annulled or prevented from expressing themselves. On the contrary, this social pluralism should be viewed as a source of enrichment and as something that ought to be expressed in the national state.

• The challenge of taking Arab affairs seriously. A national Arab strategy must be drawn that is built on a definition of what we, as Arabs, need to accomplish. Henry Kissinger has written that the starting point for any decision on foreign policy is to specify what do we want it to achieve, and what do want to avert or prevent? Therefore, we must learn what it is we want to realize and what we want to avoid within objective opportunities and limitations. It is the task and function of the strategy to answer these questions. The strategy defines the balance between goals and abilities as well as prioritizing and ordering the desired goals.

There is no doubt that the Arab nation is passing through a ruinous crisis. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that this crisis touches a number of countries and threatens their religious and sectarian fragmentation. As much as it is a moment of pain and bitterness, this crisis is also a moment of making choices and being tested. The Chinese write the word ‘crisis’ with two symbols: the first signifies danger or threat and the second represents opportunity. Hence, times of crisis and danger are also times that the rising elites can use to put forward new visions and ideas for the future.

There are abundant writings on the surrounding dangers and scenarios for rupture and fragmentation, but do we think about the opportunities available as well? These dangers have confirmed the inability of any Arab country to confront them alone. Hence, Arab integration and the combined resources of Arab power are the only means to guarantee the survival and preservation of national security and attain the hoped-for goals.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes
1. The contributors to The State of the Arab Nation 2014–2015, edited by Ali E.Hillal Dessouki, are: Ibrahim Nasr al-Din, Ahmad Hilwani, Ahmad Yusuf Ahmad, Antoine Zahlan,

2. See the special dossier on Iran in Al-Siyasah al-dawliyyah (2014), which includes a collection of articles on Iran’s political system and its foreign policies.

3. All these constitutional texts are available publicly in print, and some are online in both Arabic and English.

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