Another risky year: the state of the Arab nation, 2015/16

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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of risk analysis – considered one of the important perspectives for understanding socio-political systems, and their sources of cohesion or instability – this paper provides a general account of the major developments that have occurred in the Arab countries during and after 2015. It argues that the dangers and risks confronting these countries have been on the increase.

KEYWORDS

Risk analysis; Arab countries

Arab societies are characterized by a high level of uncertainty and the deterioration of the legal–moral foundations that define the relationship between societal actors. There is an increasing use of force as a means of resolving disputes. This leads, at best, to fostering feelings of distrust between social groups and, at worst, to the outbreak of internal wars. The end result is the loss of ‘the constitutive ideas’ that guide the course of society as a whole.

This paper further argues that in 2015 the bulk of Arab countries underwent a number of national, regional and international developments that sustained and deepened the enabling conditions of the crisis situation in the Arab world. For instance, in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen bloody wars continued along ethnic, communal and tribal lines; while in Egypt, Tunisia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Jordan violent and terrorist activities persisted. There have been increasing calls for adopting federalism, and establishing autonomous regions in cases like Yemen, Libya, Syria and Iraq. In brief, within a context of vulnerability to regional and global penetration, factors that once counted for democratic transition and political liberalization after the Arab uprisings have gone through steady decline. Severe economic repercussions were easily identified in low-income countries, while rich oil-producing countries were hit by the sharp decline in oil prices.

At the beginning of 2016, there were initial signs of reconciliation in conflict-riddled countries, but they were soon to fade away or face serious impediments. In Libya, conflicting parties signed the Sukhairat Agreement, formed a government of national accord and restored efforts to draft a new constitution. However, groups loyal to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) consolidated their hold over Sert and initiated a number of attacks on oil installations and the Libyan army. By mid-2016, units of American and European special forces were on the ground and American raids on ISIS positions were crucial to the war against ISIS. In Syria, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)
adopted a resolution that imposed a ceasefire and launched the fourth round of negotiations in Geneva between representatives from the Syrian government and the opposition groups. The negotiations got nowhere, war was renewed with vigour and an unprecedented human tragedy developed in Aleppo and in other parts of the country. In Yemen, ceasefire arrangements on the Saudi-Yemeni borders were carried out, Saudi Arabia declared the end of its military operations in Yemen, and negotiations between the Yemeni government and the Houthis were started in April 2016 in Kuwait. Similar to what happened in the case of Syria, the negotiations reached a dead-end because of Houthi intransigence, which re-ignited the fighting. Finally, in Iraq the army scored a series of successes, liberated Ramadi and Fallujah from ISIS hands, and started its campaign to liberate Mosul, the third largest city in Iraq. However, the success was marred by stories of abuses perpetrated against the Sunni inhabitants of these areas by the victorious Shiite members of the so-called Popular Mobilization Forces.

Notwithstanding these developments, every war, in theory, must have an end. These countries will be confronted with challenges of post-war reconstruction and economic development which will require a great deal of resources and time. Equally important will be the problems of moral and social reconciliation between the protagonists and their ability to rebuild a functioning society.

The following sections review the global and regional impact on the Arab countries, major political and economic trends, and, finally, look at relevant developments in a number of Arab hotspots.

The international system: continuing conflict and cooperation between the great powers

As our starting point we shall examine the international system and its impact on the Arab region – a long-time pole of attraction for the great powers because of its strategic position, oil and Israel. The importance of the Arab region has been enhanced in the last few years in the aftermath of popular uprisings, the ascendancy of political Islam and the mushrooming of civil wars and acts of terrorism. In general, the great powers have continued their involvement in the region, developing and adopting a number of policies that can be analyzed from three perspectives.

The first is continuity and change. While continuity was the main feature of American policy towards the region, change was dominant in Russian positions and decisions. Moscow opted for more decisive stances and was more willing to take risks, which was evident in its direct military intervention in Syria in 2015 and in using Iranian military bases in 2016 (Lukyanov 2015). Both the European Union and China maintained their profile in the region with minor changes here and there, and their role continued to be peripheral.

The second is the degree of conflict and cooperation between great powers in dealing with Arab issues. All of them agreed on the necessity of reaching a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, and cooperated together to implement such an agreement. In other cases, cooperation between the great powers was mixed with rivalry and conflict. Syria is a case in point. Despite the fact that Washington and Moscow support different parties in the conflict, both cooperated in the fight against ISIS and al-Nusra and voted in support of a number of UNSC resolutions, the most important being Resolution 2254 (S/RES/2254)
of 18 December 2015. The fourth round of negotiations in Geneva in 2016 would not have been possible had it not been for the pressure exercised by both countries over their local allies. Similarly, cooperation between the United States and Russia was evident in their agreement over a UNSC resolution regarding Yemen, the cautious Russian position about Western powers intervening in Libya and their support of Kurdish groups in Syria (El-Sayed 2016).

The third is the level of the great powers’ involvement in Arab affairs. Given the Barack Obama administration’s commitment not to get involved in large-scale wars in the region, the United States developed alternative ways of intervention by proxy through a third party, including the use of drones and the dependence on US special forces for technical help and limited military missions (Kamal 2016).

The same applies to European countries such as Italy and France. After a period of hesitation, they found themselves driven to intervene through intelligence and military means in Libya to stop the expansion of ISIS and avert illegal migration across the Mediterranean. France also played a leading role in developing new initiatives to resume the Palestinian–Israeli peace negotiations.

The regional environment: increasing roles of Turkey and Iran

Over the last few years, the regional role of Turkey and Iran has been increasing. Their domestic environments, regional policies and international dynamics have impacted inter-Arab politics. In respect to Turkey’s internal dynamics, four critical junctures are identifiable. The first concerns the unsuccessful attempt in 2015 of President Ragab Tayyib Erdogan to introduce constitutional amendments and change the Turkish political system from parliamentary to presidential. As demonstrated in the results of the June and November 2015 elections, this failure is attributed to the following:

- The failure of the ruling party Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)\(^1\) to win the necessary majority to introduce these amendments in parliament.
- Its failure to attain the required threshold of votes in parliament to call for a referendum on these amendments.
- Its inability to form a political alliance with any of the major political parties.

Unexpectedly, the election results showed that the Kurdish People’s Democratic Party was able to exceed the electoral threshold required for gaining parliamentary representation, with 13% of the votes in the June elections and 11% in the November elections.

The second juncture is the augmentation of the Kurdish national issue in Turkey which was triggered during the elections by the AKP’s electoral emphasis on Turkish nationalism. The escalation against the Kurdish demands on the level of political discourse and the level of the intensification of military operations against the Kurdish Labor Party’s positions that resulted in the outbreak of street warfare in Kurdish cities, increased terrorist attacks against the Turkish military and civilian posts, and the ceiling of Kurdish political demands being raised through demands for self-autonomy in their cities. The Kurdish situation in Turkey was fuelled by the military victories and political status acquired by Kurds in Syria under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party – considered an ally of the Kurdistan Labor Party in Turkey – and its protection units.
The third juncture is the revelations about the secret cooperation between the Turkish government and ISIS. Such cooperation included providing secure corridors for ISIS through Turkey to Syria, facilitating the transfer of individuals, arms and ammunition, receiving the wounded in Turkish hospitals, and allowing the establishment for some ISIS branches inside Turkey to administer these matters. Russia and Western countries repeatedly accused Turkey of opening its borders to ISIS and other terrorist groups and provided videos as evidence of such a link.

The fourth juncture is the consequences and ramifications of the aborted military coup of 15 July 2016. Erdogan has used the event to consolidate his personal power, to get rid of his political opponents, symbolized by the supporters of Gulen Movement, and to arrest or layoff potential adversaries covering all walks of life, including officers, university professors, judges, journalists, civil servants and even the Turkish football federation. The outcome is a stronger president, but a country with a divided society and a much weaker army and institutions. Erdogan’s offensive measures are likely to produce negative reactions which have already been manifested in the terrorist activities of August 2016 and later.

On the external level, the Turkish government sought to bring the Syrian regime down in 2015 with no success. This is attributed to the changing military balance on the ground as a result of the Russian intervention in September 2015 in support of the regime, while the role of groups supported by Turkey waned. Another factor is the US–Russian agreement on a number of issues that differ from the Turkish perspective including its insistence that the ousting of Bashar Al Assad should be a prerequisite for a transitional political solution and should precede the declaration of a transitional period, the necessity of establishing ‘a safe zone’ on the Turkish–Syrian border in which the Syrian air force is not allowed to operate, and its antagonist and non-recognition of the positive role of the Kurds in Syria.

Turkey’s relations with its neighbours fluctuated between implicit tensions and uncertain improvement. The Iraqi government denounced the Turkish decision to dispatch troops into Bashiq camp in East Mosul, denied that it has made such a request from Ankara, and considered it as an infringement on Iraqi territory and sovereignty. Tensions between Egypt and Turkey continued because of Turkish support for the Muslim Brothers’ hostile activities against the Egyptian government. Tensions also grew with the United States and the European Union because of the Turkish crackdown on the freedom of expression, e.g., the closure of Zaman – an opposition newspaper – and imposing restrictions on the use of social media. Similarly, an open conflict erupted between Ankara and Moscow in the aftermath of the shooting down of a Russian military plane close to the Turkish–Syrian border, as mentioned above.

On the other side, Turkey achieved an improvement in its relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. As to Saudi Arabia, an agreement to establish a supreme council for strategic cooperation with Turkey was signed and the Turkish army participated in the grand military manoeuvre (the North Thunder) organized by Saudi Arabia in February–March 2016. Qatar agreed to host a Turkish military base in January 2016, which allowed Turkey a direct role in Gulf defence. Turkey sought also to improve its relations with Israel, which were severed in the aftermath of the Israeli attack on the Turkish ships attempting to break the naval blockade of Gaza in May 2010 (Al Tafa‘olat Al Turkyya ma‘ Al Nizam Al Araby (Turkey’s Interactions with the Arab System) 2016). Eventually, in 2016, diplomatic relations between the two countries were resumed.
The consequences on foreign policy caused by the abortive military coup were immense and diverse. It led to more tensions with the United States over the Turkish demand to extradite Fathallah Gulen from the USA, whom they accused of engineering the failed coup. The same is true for the relations with the European Union which expressed its concern about the state of human rights in Turkey and because of the differences in the implementation of the agreement about Syrian refugees. On the other side, it led to a significant improvement in relations with Russia; Erdogan made an apology to Moscow about shooting down of the jet fighter and went to St Petersburg to meet with President Putin in August 2016. It is still uncertain to what extent these changes in Turkish foreign policy will continue and stabilize.

As for Iran, the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the great powers represented a turning point in its domestic and external situation. The Iranian leadership perceived the agreement as a step forward in enhancing the economic development of the country, because it would release the Iranian frozen accounts in American and European banks, remove economic sanctions, and encourage trade and foreign investments (Makram 2016).

Iranians were so relieved by the agreement that they rushed to Tehran airport to welcome Mohammed Gavad Zarif, the foreign minister, in a hero-like reception. It appeared that the agreement would give a boost to the reformist trend in the country symbolized by President Hassan Rouhani. To appease the hardliners, the Supreme Leader of the Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made a point of taking a cautious and critical position. He underlined that the American objective of signing the agreement was to infiltrate Iran and corrupt its revolutionary values; an objective he would not allow them to achieve. In the elections of the 10th Shoura Council and Assembly of Experts, reformist candidates improved their position, as happened in the city of Tehran where they swept all the seats of the Shoura Council and led the results of Assembly of Experts elections. Former President Hashemi Rafsanjani won the highest amount of votes, followed by President Rouhani. But this improvement did not change the political balance of the country in which conservatives dominate. By mid-2016, there was increasing scepticism in Iran as to the economic results of the agreement because of the delay in releasing frozen funds and the American criticism of Iran’s missile activities.

Regionally, Iran’s relations with Saudi Arabia deteriorated because of their fundamental disagreements over the Syrian and Yemeni wars, the human tragedy and killing of so many Iranians in Mina during the pilgrimage of 2015, and Iran’s intervention in Bahrain to ignite political instability. The tensions peaked when Saudi Arabia sentenced Shiite Sheikh Nimr Baqir El Nimr to death, a sentence which Iran strongly condemned and Iranian demonstrations surrounded the Saudi embassy in Tehran and stormed its consulate in Mashhad. As result, Riyadh severed its diplomatic relations with Tehran and escalated its media campaign against ‘the Iranian threat’ to Gulf and Arab security. The League of Arab States (LAS) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation passed resolutions against Iran in support of Saudi Arabia.

In contrast, Iran increased its ties with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and the Houthi movement in Yemen. Iran continued to be a cornerstone to the survival of the Syrian regime, where it provided arms, ammunition and fighters. It was also instrumental in securing Hezbollah participation in the fighting, and in August 2016 it allowed Russian military planes to use its airbase (Hamadan) to launch raids against opposition strongholds in Syria.
Critics of Iran’s agreement with the big powers on its nuclear activities exaggerated the regional impact of the agreement, suggesting that it would give Iran a free hand in the Gulf. This has proven to be untrue because of Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states’ policies and Washington’s mistrust of Iranian ambitions (Al Tafa’olat Al Turkyya ma’ Al Nizam Al Araby (Turkey’s Interactions with the Arab System) 2016).

In addition to Turkey and Iran, the role of Ethiopia became more assertive. Addis Ababa continued building its Renaissance Dam despite Egyptian reservations that the dam would affect its historical and legitimate share of Nile water.

To sum up, non-Arab neighbour states enhanced their leverage on Arab states because of the latter’s fragmentation and disunity, the collapse of central government in some of them, and the rise of extremist organizations and its control of vast territories which resulted in the weakness of the Arab system and its institutions.

Dynamics of the Arab system (Ahmed et al. 2016)

In general, what happened in 2015/16 was a reinforcement of the premises and indications that had loomed in the preceding two years. Terrorism remained the central topic that international and regional interactions hovered around. Arab leaders continued to emphasize the dangers of terrorism and its impact on the nation-state’s stability and cohesion and most Arab governments updated their anti-terrorism legislations. Of particular interest in this regard is the increasing ‘communalization’ of political conflicts, especially the Sunni–Shiite conflict, which began to crystallize, especially after the Anglo-American occupation in Iraq in 2003. The Sunni–Shiite division in Iraq was promoted by the USA and Iran, and the latter projected itself as a patron for Shiite communities in different Arab countries.

On the other side, Saudi Arabia became the focal point of the Sunnis. King Salman, who assumed power in January 2015, spared no effort to attract Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan into joining the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance.

In addition to terrorism, the Arab regional system was seriously weakened by domestic political fragmentation and civil wars. These wars led to the de facto partition of a number of countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen. Features of contention between central governments and opposition groups included the continuing disagreement over the terms of a political solution of the conflict and the new social contract, the tendency of some ethnic groups towards separation from the existent state or to adopt federalism, and the conflicting objectives and interests of the external actors.

Saudi Arabia and the GCC states maintained their privileged position in leading inter-Arab politics and domination over the decision-making process. Most important decisions taken by LAS and its councils were predetermined by Gulf states, and it could mobilize the necessary majority for them. In this context, it is important to refer to Egyptian–Saudi interactions. Notwithstanding their differences over the situation in Yemen and Syria, both countries maintained a remarkable level of coordination and emphasis on the commonalities, rather than the disputed issues. This enhanced mutual understanding between both countries and left it open for each to develop its own policy. A case in point is the proposal to establish a common Arab military force suggested by Egyptian President Abdel Fatah El Sisi at the Arab Summit in March 2015. The proposal was anonymously approved, but because of Saudi reservations, it came to a dead-end. Such a disagreement,
however, did not prevent a historic visit by King Salman to Egypt in April 2016 in which both countries approved cooperation programmes on a wide range of issues.

A significant sign of inter-Arab differences was the surprising decision of Morocco not to host the annual Arab Summit meeting which is supposed to convene in March of each year. The Moroccan declaration justified the decision by the absence of Arab will to deal with different crises seriously. Meanwhile, since the tenure of the secretary general of LAS was about to expire, Arab heads of states delegated their power to choose a new person to their foreign ministers. Given the Egyptian–Saudi agreement, it was easy for Arab foreign ministers to approve the Egyptian candidate, Ahmed Abou El Gheet, at their meeting on 10 March 2016. The summit meeting was convened in July 2016 with poor attendance from heads of states and nothing significant came out of it.

**Domestic political developments: the reverse of the democratic transition**

As regards the domestic political scene, we can identify a number of major developments (Ahmed et al. 2016). One is the state/society crisis situation that has persisted in many countries with no light so far appearing at the end of the tunnel. Resorting to the use of violence, assassinations and terrorist activities has been widespread, which has resulted in allowing security forces broader powers to deal with the ensuing emergency situations. Another is authoritarian sustainability; the process of redrafting constitutions, and fundamental laws or their amendments, which turned out to be more a source of conflict and dissensus rather than a device for political inclusion and national reconciliation. Elections were designed to ensure the control of the ruling regimes and their supporters in most of the Arab states. The authoritarian quality of Arab politics can be attributed to the rentier nature of Arab economies, the primacy of ethnic identities and loyalties, and networks of patron–client relations. Arab authoritarian regimes encourage the expansion of military roles in managing the affairs of the states, either on the basis of their leading role in anti-terrorist activities or by their ability to implement developmental projects with a great deal of efficiency.

Resorting to street politics is the third factor. It continued to be a feature of Arab life and was a reflection of the inability of existing political institutions to channel popular demands and interests. Due to the weak institutional basis of these practices, there is the danger of it developing into violence in a way that will threaten the fabric of the state.

Thus, the hopes that the Arab Spring would lead to a smooth democratic transition have since faded away. Neo-authoritarian regimes are now on the rise and the activities of civil society associations are constrained. The public space is getting tighter.

**Economic developments**

The common feature of the Arab economies has been its continued dependence on the rentier sector, whereby extractive industries formed 60% of the total number of industries. This explains why the sharp drop in oil prices has made these countries vulnerable to the volatile international economy. The severity of this impact has differed from one country to another; the economies of the GCC countries were affected by this shock in a lesser degree compared with other Arab oil countries. According to World Bank estimates, the ratios of change in the commercial oil balance to gross domestic production in
Kuwait, Oman, Iraq and Libya exceeded 10% in 2014, while this percentage was less in Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

A positive development, though, did take place due to the expansion of the building and construction sectors, iron and steel, and fertilizer industries. Consequentially, the share of manufacturing industries to the Arab gross production rose from 9.2%, with a growth rate of 4.4% in 2013, to 17.1%, with a growth rate of 9% in 2014.

Inter-Arab economic relations and trade with other countries were also affected. The level of gross Arab exports in 2014 dropped by 6.6%. As a result, the percentage of the overall Arab exports to its global counterpart fell from 7% in 2013 to 6.5% in 2014. Following the same pattern, the percentage of Arab imports declined from 5.8% in 2013 to 3.3% in 2014 when compared with global imports.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates underlined that violent conflicts have a negative impact on the macro-economic performance of Arab economies. Political developments have an impact on the economic situation, especially in terms of the decline in productivity, consumption rates, as well as the costs of terrorism and violence. Investments were discouraged as a result of the high volatile and hostile political environment and governments’ bureaucratic intervention.

Military expenditure in the Middle East in 2014 was on the rise as it reached US$196 billion, an equivalent of 5.2% of the region’s gross domestic production. Saudi Arabia was ranked the fourth country in the world in military expenditure. The same trend continued in 2016.

To sum up, there are six features that have characterized Arab economies since 2011: the continuation of rentier economies, the decline of economic growth rates, the modest level of inter-Arab trade, the economic vulnerability of the region to the outside world, the increasing military expenditure, and the rising economic and human costs of military conflicts. Bearing in mind the decline in oil prices, the deterioration in the economic situation is most likely to continue and so will the associated political and social risks.

**Conflict and war zones**

The Arab world has been a storehouse of many disputes and conflicts; one of them is as old as the Palestinian issue which goes back to 1948, another finds its origin in the consequences of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait 1990 which resulted eventually in the occupation of Iraq in 2003; and most of them flared up after the popular uprisings after 2011 in Syria, Yemen and Libya. Despite the different origins of these crises, it is surprising that they exhibit similar features including political fragmentation, politicization of ethnic conflicts, heightened human cost and primacy of external intervention.

On one end of the spectrum is the oldest case of Palestine, where there has been a noticeable absence of a unified benchmark. There were two competing and conflicting governments: the government of the Palestinian authority led by Fatah and the PLO in the West Bank and the second is the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, in addition to many other groups and militias, each claiming to be the true representative of Palestine. All attempts for mediation between the two governments or to call for new parliamentary elections have failed.
The decline in the importance of the Palestine issue on the Arab political agenda continued. In the context of the Arab uprisings, the Palestine issue was not present. Arab states tended to focus on their own domestic issues. There was further human suffering inflicted upon the Palestinians because of the deteriorating situation in Syria and Lebanon which hosted many of them, and their demonization in a number of other Arab countries.

On the other hand, international and particularly European support for the Palestinian issue persisted. The majority of the members of the UN recognized the state of Palestine as a non-member observer in the General Assembly; and the Palestinian flag was hoisted for the first time in the UN on 10 September 2015. Many European states continued to boycott products from Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.

This period also witnessed new initiatives to resume Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, in particular the French and Egyptian ones. However, as a result the continued Israeli policy of settlement and the creeping annexations of Palestinian land and their deteriorating economic and social conditions, a new round of violence erupted. Palestinians used knives to attack soldiers and civilians alike. Irrespective of what this wave may lead to, it is an indication that Palestine remains a powder keg.

In Iraq, as a result of the repeated protests against administrative and financial corruption and the decline of basic services, not to mention electricity and water supplies, in 2015 Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi initiated a reform plan that was partially implemented. As these reforms were not seriously carried out, protests erupted again in March 2016, led by Muqtada Al Sadr who called his supporters to organize mass protest demonstrations to put pressure on the government to continue its reform plan.

The continuation of the political crisis was overshadowed by the military victories by the Iraqi army in defeating ISIS. By August 2016, the army liberated 40% of the land that was controlled by ISIS troops. However the victory was blemished by stories of mistreatment of Sunni inhabitants of these territories by members of Shiite popular mobilization forces. Another significant development concerns the increasing demands for further self-autonomy in Kurdistan. Manifestations of these developments include digging trenches along what the Kurds believe to be their territory, the increasing number of diplomatic missions in Erbil which reached 31 in mid-2015, and the establishment of a stock market (Kurdistan Regional Government 2014).

At the external level, Iraq sought to cement its Arab ties and Prime Minister Abbadi paid visits to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. He emphasized the independence of Iraq’s foreign policy and its non-involvement in Saudi–Iranian conflict. However, Iraq opposed the Saudi-led Arab alliance in support of the legitimate government in Yemen, the idea of establishing a common Arab military force and resolutions condemning Iran in the aftermath of attacks against Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran.

In Syria, the military initiative changed hands more than once. During most of 2015, opposition forces scored a number of victories and put the government on the defensive. The military and financial support provided by the United States and its allies enabled opposition militias to achieve these victories, while the Syrian army and its supporters suffered a major shortage in manpower. According to President Al Assad, numbers in the army decreased from 350,000 in 2011 to 150,000 in 2015.3 By October of the same year, the balance of power changed in favour of the government due to Russian military intervention (Al-Amara 2016).
The new balance of power made it necessary to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis. After reaching a US–Russian common understanding, UNSC Resolution 2254 was adopted in December 2015 (Alam 2016). The resolution mapped the road towards resuming negotiations between the government and the opposition, arranging a ceasefire, and opening safe and humanitarian corridors for civilians in the besieged cities. Despite the resolution and subsequent diplomatic endeavours, the situation in Syria remained fluid and dangerous, and military battles never ceased. A major tragic consequence of the Syrian crisis was the fleeing of hundreds of thousands of refugees into neighbouring European countries.

Three features persisted in the Libyan crisis, which included:

- the fragmentation of political forces;
- continuing civil war with an increasing presence of ISIS; and
- external intervention.

By 2016, there existed three governments in Libya, each controlling certain territory and claiming to be the legitimate government of the country: the Inkaz (rescue) government, the transitional government and the accord government. So far, the Libyan parliament has not approved the accord government, which came as a result of the UN-supervised Sukhairyat agreement and enjoys broad Arab and international support. The net outcome has been the absence of national consensus or a way to end the Libyan crisis.

Political fragmentation was accompanied by a corresponding multiplicity of militias and ongoing civil wars (Ali 2016). Conflicts between cities erupted in west Libya, street warfare and gangsters controlled parts of the south, ISIS and extreme groups controlled a number of cities, of which most important is Sert in the south. The collapse of law and order has made Libya a major centre for illegal migration to Europe. It has also led to an increasing number of internally displaced to reach around 49% of the overall population in November 2015 (CAPS 2015).

Being an important oil producer and given its geographical proximity to Europe, Western powers could not afford the economic and security repercussions of the Libyan crisis. Their military intervention was instrumental in helping opposition forces and ensuring the collapse of the Al Gaddafi regime. In 2015–16, Western intervention was evident in the war against ISIS to liberate the territories which it controls and took the form of intelligence-gathering and the use of special forces. By late August 2016, for the first time US helicopters participated in the fight in Sert. At a political level, the UN continued its efforts to draw up a new constitution and mediate between the protagonists.

Similarly, the Yemeni crisis has been characterized by political and military fragmentation and external intervention. Traditionally, Yemen is a tribal society with many social, geographical and ethnic cleavages. By 2015, conflict was crystallized between two forces: the legitimate government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansur Hadi and opposition forces represented by the Houthi–Saleh alliance. In early 2015, the Houthi–Saleh alliance took over most of Yemen, reaching the southern port of Aden, and it attempted to impose a new de facto situation. Recognizing the threat to its southern borders and fearing an Iranian role in the crisis, Saudi Arabia established the Arab alliance and intervened militarily in support of the legitimate government in what was called ‘Decisive Storm’. Gradually, pro-government forces restored control over southern Yemen where the government
resides and a long war continues. Similar also to Libya, Syria and Iraq, a human tragedy developed due to the shortage of food, water and health services.

Given the uncertain balance of force between the two camps and the feeling of the oppositions that their forces could achieve a military victory, the UN-led negotiations that started in Kuwait in April 2016 led to nowhere, and still the war continues.

The preceding analysis obviously substantiates the main argument presented at the beginning of this paper. Dangers and risks to Arab countries are mounting and are being initiated from domestic regional and global sources. ‘The Arab state system’ is on the defensive vis-à-vis forces of internal decisiveness and foreign encroachment. In a sense, there has been an increasing externalization and globalization of what used to be domestic problems and conflicts. The intermingling of actors and issues in the conduct of Arab crisis has made it more difficult to resolve.

Notes
1. The Justice and Development Party.
2. For more details on the development of Turkish foreign policy towards its neighbours, see Nohra (2016).
3. For the full text of President Bashar Al Assad, see the Al-Jamal website, July 26, 2016. http://www.aljaml.com/
4. It comprised the GCC states of Egypt, Sudan, Jordan and Morocco.

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