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## The Middle East in Flux

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Once upon a time—around the beginning of the twentieth century—statesmen in London created the Middle East. It was a region “in the middle” of economic and strategic communications routes to colonial possessions farther east. For a long time, people in the West at least had a pretty good idea of where the Middle East was and what it was like. Territorially, it conformed roughly to the remains of the Ottoman Empire, the “sick man of Europe.” It included Turkey’s Anatolian heartland and its Arab possessions in Asia, the Balkans to the west, and Egypt. The people of the Middle East were “Orientals” adhering to an alien religion—Islam—and possessed of “traditional” cultural and social habits. Its petty rulers were patrimonial and authoritarian.

### Reckoning with Regions

Third in a series

Today the Middle East is far bigger, far more important economically, far more socially developed, and far more dangerous than it was a century ago. Its boundaries have expanded to the west and to the east. It has become, as Clovis Maksoud of American University has remarked of the Arab world, “a rich nation of poor people.” Oil has proved both a blessing and a curse. The Middle East’s component parts are now some two dozen authoritarian and unstable nation-states still searching for legitimacy and now being challenged by the so-called Arab Spring.

The balance of power within this regional system is undergoing fundamental changes. The region is also experiencing a crisis of identity due to powerful ideological currents, of which political Islam is the most prominent. And if the Middle East is no longer very important as a stopping place on the way to India (as it was during the European colonial period), it is strategically more

important to US and other Western policy makers—and it is far more worrisome.

### WHERE IN THE WORLD?

The region’s boundaries have always been a matter of debate. Today, considering huge changes that have occurred in the Middle East and the effects that globalization has had on it, the nomenclature used to describe the region is even more arguable. Growing Arab communal awareness now requires the inclusion of North Africa. One must also note that Turkey uneasily balances its claim to be European with a renewed sense of Middle Eastern and Islamic identity.

As for Middle Easterners themselves, I have never heard an inhabitant of this contested area, when asked “Who (or what) are you?” reply “I am Middle Eastern.” A more likely reply would be “I am an Arab” or “I am Egyptian” or “I am Muslim.” Middle Eastern intellectuals of my acquaintance bridle at the term “Middle East,” which they correctly associate with a Western, imperial point of view. But as Asia rises on the Middle Eastern horizon, I now hear those same intellectuals saying that they do not wish their region to be defined as “West Asia.”

The term “Middle East” has itself taken various shapes over the past century, both as a strategic and as a cultural concept. From the strategic perspective the starting point is the work of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the influential American theorist of sea power. In 1902 he coined the term “Middle East” and defined it roughly as a broad stretch of land and water from Suez to Singapore—an area he considered strategically vital for Great Britain and its empire.

This is definitely not the Middle East that Americans understand today; but, curiously, it may be coming back (albeit under another name) as a strategic concept driven by economic globalization and the rise of India and China as great

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powers in an increasingly multipolar world. The journalist Robert D. Kaplan, for one, argues that the Indian Ocean is becoming a new focal point of geopolitical competition.

The United States, when it emerged as a global power, followed strategically in Britain's footsteps. In the period after World War II, while the State Department experimented with several administrative models (an assistant secretary once boasted that he was responsible for an area from Marrakesh to Bangladesh), a certain consensus may have been represented by the new Washington-based Middle East Institute, with its strong ties to the State and Defense Departments and oil companies.

That institute in 1947 launched *The Middle East Journal*, publishing a map that generously showed the region stretching from Morocco across Arab North Africa, dipping down into the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somaliland, then leaping eastward beyond Iran to include Afghanistan, Muslim Central Asia, Pakistan, and India. By 2005, the institute had modified its map to exclude India and the Horn of Africa while expanding it further into the Caucasus and Central Asia.

For its part, the Central Intelligence Agency has since 1975 maintained an office of Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, which covers all of the Arab world, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Bangladesh (though not Turkey), while conceding that "the Near East" and "South Asia" are different regions.

## FUNDAMENTAL SHIFTS

Two centuries ago the Middle Eastern economy was largely agrarian and rural. The region's people were largely illiterate. Living standards were low. The Middle East was an exporter of foodstuffs and an importer of finished goods. All this began to change toward the end of the eighteenth century. The region became increasingly penetrated by and linked to the global economy. Capitalist enterprises and banks appeared. In the mid-nineteenth century a movement in the Ottoman Empire initiated land reforms, educational development, and even constitutional and political change. All the processes of modernization sped up in the twentieth century—urbanization, growth of public infrastructure, educational expansion, literacy, newspaper readership.

As Europe's imperialist competition spread, France established control over much of North Africa and later Syria and Lebanon. Britain sought to dominate southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf and established a protectorate over Egypt. Britain and Russia created spheres of influence in Iran.

The picture today is very different. For one thing, the total population of the region (the Arab countries, Iran, and Turkey) is around 500 million. To give an idea of the pace of population growth over recent years, the Arab world grew from around 172 million people in 1980 to 331 million 25 years later. While in recent years birth rates have begun to decline, the region still is among the fastest-growing in the world. By 2020, 60 percent of people in the Arab world will live in urban areas.

The region also displays a youth bulge: Almost 65 percent of the population is under the age of 30. This can be good news in terms of economic growth potential, but bad news if high unemployment is the result. Governments have made huge investments in mass education, but the quality of that education remains problematic.

After World War II most Middle Eastern economies grew substantially, and growth has continued into recent times. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the region's annual rate of growth in gross domestic product from 2000 to 2005 averaged 5.2 percent (5.6 percent for the oil-exporting countries and 4.4 percent for the oil importers). Old-timers who remember the region in the late 1940s are astonished at its physical infrastructure today—roads, public works, utilities. Oil of course has made a huge difference, not only for the main petroleum exporters (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Algeria) but also for neighboring countries that have enjoyed the ripple effects.

Development, however, has been quite uneven. Although regional income inequality has lessened in recent years, the gaps are still dramatic. According to the IMF, per capita GDP in 2010 for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was \$59,717, while for Yemen it was \$1,282. Except for the oil exporters, unemployment has remained stuck at around 12 percent for several years, among the highest rates in the world.

The reasons, according to the IMF, are structural, and not just a function of fluctuating oil

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prices. A major study by Arab social scientists, *The Arab Human Development Report* (first produced in 2002 by the United Nations Development Program and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development) has drawn attention to serious regional deficits in education, gender equality, and governance.

What we have in short is a region that is experiencing explosive demographic growth and thus has the potential for an expanded human resource base that theoretically could propel the Middle East along the same path taken by the Asian tiger economies—yet the dysfunction of ingrained political structures and habits inhibits such progress. The result has been popular tensions that are finding expression in new ideological movements, social uprisings, and in some cases political turmoil.

Another development whose influence on the region is hard to exaggerate is the rise of new information technologies and social media. The recent ideological and political upheavals across the region cannot be fully explained without reference to the “Al Jazeera phenomenon,” referring to the Arab satellite channel that since its launch in 1996 has transformed the media environment and vastly broadened not just information access but also the space available for public contestation.

Al Jazeera is not the first or the last media innovation to affect the Middle East. The advent of the transistor radio in the 1950s helped fuel the popularity of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, arguably the most famous hero of the Arabs. The availability of cassette tapes in the late 1970s helped propel the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power in Iran. More recently the information technology of choice has been the internet and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, both of which are playing a major role in facilitating the ongoing Arab uprisings.

## DISCOVERING IDENTITY

Oil wealth, uneven economic development, and new media all contribute to the cultural-identity ferment that grips the Middle East today. Who are we? What are the right rules of governance? How do we deal with multiple cultural communities sharing the same space? What principles should shape our relations with the world outside?

Modernization and Europe’s colonial penetration stimulated two ideological trends in the Middle East: nationalism and Islamism. Nationalism mostly took a liberal, secular form but it also took a form based more on ethnicity. Islam contained different strands as well, including a liberal reformist tendency but also a more puritanical, literalist form. In the period between the two world wars, all of these tendencies took root and competed with one another. They shared, however, the goal of rolling back Western colonial penetration of the region.

A major problem was presented by the fact that national identities rarely coincided with the legal boundaries of the new nation-state system. For pan-Arab nationalists, the boundaries of their nation bore no relation to the states on the map. For Muslim activists, the question was how much effort should be expended in liberating the entire *umma* (world of Islam) under a reestablished caliphate, and how much should be devoted to creating a more Islamic form of governance and social regulation in specific countries?

And so the stage was set for the identity conflicts that we see across the region today. Sprouting from seeds planted much earlier, Arab nationalists in the 1950s and 1960s attacked the traditional monarchies for being tools of the West, and kings were dethroned in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. At the same time nationalists themselves came under fire from conservative Muslim movements as being too Western and un-Islamic. As Arab nationalism faded following Nasser’s defeat at the hands of Israel in the 1967 war, there was a resurgence of local nationalisms. The surviving monarchies consolidated their positions and the newly created nationalist “republics” in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq could not work together.

Meanwhile, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, the most important of several Islamist movements, was working patiently, despite governmental persecution, to organize Egyptians and other Arabs at the local level. Spin-off groups far more radical than the Muslim Brotherhood were also taking shape, advocating violence to rid the *umma* of regimes that had fallen under the sway of the United States and other Western powers.

The year 1979 was a watershed. In that year Khomeini succeeded in leading the overthrow of

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the pro-Western shah of Iran and establishing an Islamic Republic. In Saudi Arabia a radical group seized control of the Grand Mosque of Mecca and held it for more than two weeks, presenting an unprecedented challenge to the Islamic authority of the Saudi monarchy. And in Afghanistan the Soviet invasion set in motion the establishment of a tribal Islamist movement of mujahideen, out of which the Taliban would eventually emerge.

Today the ideological picture is complicated. Almost every country in the region is wrestling with existential identity issues. Transnational Islamist radicalism is still a force, despite the killing by the United States of Osama bin Laden and the decimation of Al Qaeda's leadership. Like-minded movements are operating in South and Southeast Asia. Afghanistan and Pakistan are gripped by these forces. Spin-off organizations, such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, remain active.

Israel, though it is largely cut off from its Middle Eastern environment, is experiencing existential identity issues revolving around the question of who is a Jew and what should it mean for Israel to be recognized as a Jewish state. Turkey is trying to reconcile its secular Western identity, as prescribed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, with its deep and apparently growing Islamic consciousness.

And the region's Arabs have, in a way, rediscovered Arab nationalism—albeit in a form quite different from the doctrinaire pan-Arab parties of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the Baath, the Nasserites, and the Arab Nationalist Movement. Today, Arab nationalism arguably has a much more solid social base, owing in part to decades of labor migration across the region and to the advent of transnational Arabic media. Local nationalisms are again on the defensive.

To be sure, the protesters of the Arab Spring are not demanding the establishment of a single unified Arab state. Nevertheless, the contagion effect created by the regime changes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya suggests a significant degree of imagined community among Arabs everywhere.

## SPRING TO SUMMER

To many observers, the Middle East and the Arab world in particular have seemed a dead area for political liberalism and democracy. As democratic changes swept through Eastern Europe, Russia, and parts of Latin America and Asia in the latter decades of the twentieth century, the Middle

East appeared mired in authoritarianism. Even the few exceptions carried an asterisk. Israel looked democratic, but its large Palestinian Arab minority was socially and economically marginalized despite having formal political rights. Lebanon's democracy, structured around sectarian proportionality, was elitist.

Analysts had no trouble explaining what was wrong. There was little history of democracy in the region. The oil curse promoted passive acceptance of dictatorship in return for material gain. Cultural patrimonialism disposed people toward deference to the father and hence to the king or president. An obvious but still compelling factor was the pervasiveness and strength of states' security services. Moreover, it was argued that Arab regimes were smart—they learned how to upgrade their authoritarian mechanisms.

As we look back on the Arab Spring that started this year and continues still, we may ask how the uprisings will change the region. They show, first of all, that the Middle East is not so exceptional after all, that its people share values widely held in the rest of the world. These values include a preference for democracy.

Second, the uprisings likely will lead to a bigger role for public opinion in Middle Eastern governance. This will be bad news for politicians and elites who have corrupted government. But it will also require ordinary people to think about the nature of governance. Some fear that, without an authoritarian hand, societal fissures will emerge and that cultural pluralism will enjoy less support. Embattled regimes, such as in Bahrain and Syria, are now playing the sectarian card to alarm both citizens and foreign powers about the risks of the new populism.

Third, the spillover effect from the upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya suggests that Arabs in various countries share identity and values more than had been imagined. If a protest occurred in say, Cambodia, that was analogous to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, would it elicit a copycat response among Cambodia's neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations? It seems doubtful.

While the uprisings may indicate—and promote—an enhanced Arab solidarity, do they affect the non-Arab parts of what people consider the Middle East? Or is the Arab Spring being played out only in Arabic? Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has claimed that his country deserves some credit for providing a model for the

Arab uprisings. A problem with this assertion is that the Arab revolutionaries have made no reference to an Iranian example. Moreover, the Iranian regime's crackdown on the country's Green movement after a fraudulent election in 2009 could suggest that it is on the wrong side of history.

As for Turkey, the manifest popularity of the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Islamist Justice and Development Party seems to obviate the country's need for a popular protest example from the Arab world. In the longer term, however, Turkey may serve as an example that influences the direction of politics in the "liberated" Arab countries, inasmuch as the question of how to integrate Islamist forces in new regimes is a sensitive one.

Israel in the summer of 2011 experienced a series of very large demonstrations against the Benjamin Netanyahu government's alleged failure to deal with domestic issues such as inflation. Some commentators drew a link between these protests and the Arab Spring, but there is little evidence that either the motivations or the objectives of the Israeli protesters were at all similar to those of the Arab protesters.

Meanwhile, the Arab Spring may already have had an impact in regions far removed from the Middle East. The Chinese government is said to have listed the jasmine flower as contraband and to have cancelled the country's International Jasmine Culture Festival, and has intermittently blocked internet searches for the Chinese characters for jasmine. The authorities there apparently fear that this symbol of the Tunisian revolution might be invoked in similar protests in China. If this or other examples of imitating the Arab Spring should gain significance, we might be looking at trans-regional connections: In a globalized communications environment, regional boundaries may mean less than they used to.

## OUTSIDERS, INSIDERS

The Middle East has always been, and remains today, a highly penetrated system. Powerful Western states cannot keep their hands off it. When the Ottoman Empire, the region's indigenous hegemon, gradually faded away, the British and the French moved to fill the power vacuum. As late as World War II, the only more-or-less independent states were Turkey and Saudi Arabia. All the others were dominated to one degree or another by European powers with their protectorates, mandates, and spheres of influence. Balancing

power in the region was handled by powers from outside the region. Yet, as the Princeton historian L. Carl Brown has argued, the region—very tasty but hard to digest—has always resisted being completely taken over by these outsiders.

In the decades after World War II, the Middle East remained substantially penetrated. Global competition between the US and Soviet superpowers was replicated in the region as Washington and Moscow balanced one another and maintained relationships with clients. The Soviet Union made inroads in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, the Yemens, Algeria, and Libya, while the Americans sought to contain Soviet influence by creating a northern anticommunist tier consisting of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan. Below that line the United States also cultivated support for the monarchies: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf sheikhdoms.

Nevertheless, the regions' states were becoming more autonomous and most were now legally, if only nominally, independent. And as realist international relations theory tells us, states behave so as to maximize their power and security, balancing against their neighbors or sometimes bandwagoning with them. Culturally, as we have seen, the Middle East may be a community, but states tend to act as if they are operating in an insecure state of nature (anarchy).

Efforts to build regional organizations for the Middle East have been only partially successful. The largest, the Arab League, established in 1945, has promoted functional integration but has shown little influence in the areas of security and economic integration. Of the subregional organizations, the most vigorous has been the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. (Recently the GCC invited Jordan and Morocco to join.) The Arab Maghreb Union has been largely inactive, owing to issues between Algeria and Morocco. Proposals to create a larger organization including the Arab countries, Israel, Turkey, and Iran have foundered over long-standing regional disputes and rivalries.

We can identify several patterns of regional power balancing. In the 1950s the Saudis and the Egyptians sought to balance against the Hashemite monarchies in Iraq and Jordan (today, only the Jordanian branch survives). As Egypt under Nasser grew more powerful and tilted toward the Soviet Union, Nasser sought to ride a crest of sentiment for Arab unity, drawing on his

wide popularity (enhanced by his astute use of radio and print media).

Egypt's unity projects with Syria and Iraq failed. Still, one might describe the Arab system as Egypt-dominated until the end of the 1960s, when the country's military defeats against Israel and in Yemen bogged Nasser down. After that we witnessed the development of a multipolar regional system in the Arab world, with Saudi Arabia enjoying new (oil-fueled) influence, though it lacked hard power. The two big non-Arab states, Turkey and Iran, in that period played a secondary role.

Today the Soviet Union is gone and the United States is the uncontested hegemon of the region, with a military presence in most of the states and in key waterways. Israel, by virtue of its military capability (including nuclear weapons), is perhaps the most powerful state in the region despite its diminutive size. Iran has emerged as an active "game changer" since its Islamic revolution, posing a threat to America's oil-rich but weak Gulf allies.

Egypt lost its influence after its peace treaty with Israel, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein sought to play the role of number one in the Arab world. But Hussein made two disastrous mistakes—first, invading Iran in 1980, beginning a costly eight-year war that ended essentially in stalemate, and second, invading Kuwait in 1990, provoking a US-led military effort to drive him out. Iraq's decimation opened up opportunities for Iran to play a more prominent role in the region, but Tehran's golden opportunity only arose when the United States invaded Iraq as a misguided part of President George W. Bush's "war on terror," which vastly diminished America's soft power across the Middle East.

## THE WAY AHEAD

What does the future hold for the Middle East? The United States despite its mistakes remains the hegemon, and continues trying to impose a *Pax Americana* on a region where many conflicts remain outstanding. Of these, the most important is still the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has resisted solution despite dozens of diplomatic initiatives

and years of a "peace process" led by the United States. The Palestine issue continues to resonate deeply in the Arab and Muslim worlds. As governments in the region become more affected by public opinion, and assuming that Israel continues to enjoy unstinting US support, this problem could become even more difficult to solve.

Gulf security is another sensitive issue. Given the Gulf's huge economic importance in terms of oil and gas, it is perhaps not surprising that three wars have been fought over it since 1980: the Iraq-Iran war, the 1990 Iraqi invasion of and subsequent expulsion from Kuwait, and the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. With an assertive regime holding power in Tehran, and with the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel determined to contain Iran and deprive it of nuclear weapons, security in the Gulf will continue to be fragile.

The Arab Spring has only just begun. In addition to forcing regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, it has destabilized the ruling establishments in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. Other countries may be added to these lists. An optimistic scenario might forecast an era of legitimate governments committed to regional economic development and peaceful relations with neighbors. But the Arab Spring might also produce a long period of uncertainty and turbulence, making the region even more dangerous.

Then there is the question of transnational and trans-regional forces. Ongoing domestic tensions and the continuing US military presence in the region or nearby will continue to energize extremist movements. Meanwhile, the region is moving east, and it is getting hard to separate the situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan from the traditional Middle East, just as the Arab North African states may face difficulties that arise out of sub-Saharan Africa. Little wonder that Europe, which has a long and often contentious history with its Middle Eastern and North African neighbors, remains apprehensive over the thought of turmoil spilling onto its shores. Evidently the region will continue to exert influences—good or bad—beyond its borders. ■

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