

COMMENTARY

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The Arab Region at Tipping Point

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Exactly one year ago, a chemical weapons attack killed hundreds of unarmed civilians in rebel-held suburbs of Damascus. For a moment, the Syrian conflict could have been set on a new track. A retaliatory U.S. military strike might have triggered major defections from Bashar al-Assad army, possibly precipitating the regime's collapse. Just as importantly, it would have reversed the armed rebellion's decline and shifted its internal balance, forestalling the decisive rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Conversely, the agreement brokered by Russia to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons capability opened the way for assertive U.S.-Russian diplomacy to end the country's brutal civil war. Success in Syria would have provided a strong basis for robust joint action elsewhere in the region, including Iraq.

But the world has changed since then. Syria was left without a diplomatic framework for negotiations following the collapse of the Geneva-2 talks last February, and faces the prospect of seemingly endless armed conflict. This is complicated by the explosive rise of ISIS, which threatens both the survival of Iraq as a unified state and the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan. It has already extended the battle zone into Lebanon, albeit briefly so far. Most seriously, the sharp deterioration of U.S. and European Union relations with Russia over the Ukraine crisis precludes diplomatic cooperation in the Middle East. A prolonged rupture will divert badly needed political, financial, and strategic resources from the region.

And yet more challenges loom. Libya may slip into civil war, and faces the spectre of partition, as do Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In parallel, the declaration of the Islamic State's caliphate in Iraq and part of Syria is prompting jihadists in other countries to envisage copycat emirates of their own. Egypt, the largest Arab state in terms of population, is not at risk of civil war or of partition, but is on the path to social disaster. The combination of massive aid from the Gulf

Cooperation Council and high levels of domestic coercion has staved this off temporarily, but is already proving inadequate to deal with the country's fundamental economic problems and deep political malaise. If a social explosion occurs it will be massively costly, if not impossible, to contain.

Not all Arab countries are at risk. But taken as a whole, the Arab region is at the onset of a period similar to that of the tumultuous quarter of a century after the end of World War Two, in which newly independent Arab states took direct control over their populations, territory and natural resources, and government machinery and learned how to conduct foreign affairs and national defence. Now, as then, there are challenges to the legitimacy of state borders and domestic power structures, shifting regional alignments and cross-border threats, and political upheaval reflecting long-term socio-economic transformations.

In the 1950s, these dynamics led to the Arab "Cold War," which ended only after the resolution of Yemen's civil war in the mid-1960s and the disastrous 1967 war with Israel ushered in lasting reconciliation between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The role of multilateral institutions—especially the League of Arab States and the U.N.—in resolving disputes or managing crises was weak and ineffective then, and is now. And once again former global hegemons—Great Britain and France in the 1950s, the U.S. today—are in full or partial retreat, loosening constraints on local actors and altering their perceptions of threat and opportunity.

But history is not repeating itself. The end of British and French empire—highlighted in the Middle East by the failed intervention in the Suez Canal in 1956—was followed by the polarizing, yet stabilizing, superpower rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. That is not the case now. The NATO action in Libya in 2011 was a highpoint, but the response of the U.S. and the European Union to events in the region since then has been feeble to the point of disinterest: the "planned" mass killing of demonstrators in Egypt in August 2013, as Human Rights Watch called it, Libya's ongoing implosion since May 2014, the massive death and destruction inflicted by Israel on Gaza's civilian population in July-August, and even the advances of ISIS in Iraq since June.

Arab responses to geo-political flux and transition also differ in critically important ways. Newly independent states after 1945 were inexperienced and vulnerable—most of North Africa, the Gulf littoral states, and Sudan did not even gain independence before 1951-1971—and under-developed administratively and politically. But now most are over-developed—"fierce," as political scientist Nazih Ayubi labelled them—with massive bureaucracies and security services and decades of experience in monitoring populations and protecting borders and ruling regimes.

However, "hardening" has not made most Arab states noticeably more efficient in providing basic needs and public goods and services, and certainly not more equitable in doing so. And it has not made them more tolerant of the religious, confessional, ethnic, or regional diversity of

their populations or more merciful generally. To the contrary, Arab states are probably less amenable now than in their formative years to pressures for needed political change, and less willing or able to introduce reforms allowing crucial improvements to economic performance and social equity.

For most Arab states, this sets them on a downhill path. Economic inequality and rudimentary social welfare systems in the independence period led to political unrest, and ultimately to actual or attempted regime change, in most Arab countries. But the gap between rich and poor has never been so wide or so apparent as it is now. No less seriously, the populations of Arab states then were far smaller and largely rural, allowing food subsistence at affordable cost for the vast majority. But populations now are several times larger, with greater numbers at or below the poverty line, and overwhelmingly urban, leaving them dependent on food imports and subsidies.

The economic failure of a growing number of Arab states—including oil exporters such as Iraq and Libya—is particularly significant against this backdrop. It moreover explains why the most powerful ideological discourse of the independence period, Arab nationalism, has now given way to variants of Islamism that are increasingly militant and sectarian. To a large degree this reflects social changes: Arab nationalism was adopted by certain “popular classes,” but remained heavily the product and domain of elites and the intelligentsia, whereas today’s Salafism (and its Shia equivalent) is taking hold predominantly among the massive, growing under-class.

For some, the trend reveals the power of sectarianism. But in reality, it reflects the degradation and mutation of structures of political and social power and economic wealth the decades since the Arab state system stabilized in the early 1970s. The failure to evolve in ways that were responsive to social change and democratic in economic restructuring has left most Arab states, if not all of them, struggling to meet the complex challenges of today’s world. There is no external power that has the capability to provide assistance or engage in intervention of the scope and scale needed to fix their problems. Indeed, it is no longer even certain that the Arab region is important enough to generate such an interest.

The Arab states are at a tipping point. Some have already gone past it, while others must make hard choices if they are to avoid it.

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