Middle East Brief

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Saving the Middle East

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By the standards of the previous five decades, today's Middle East is unrecognizable. Most apparent is the absence of an organizing principle. In the second half of the twentieth century the region was defined by large trajectories: decolonization, the Arab Cold War, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. But unless chaos is viewed as an organizing principle, none such exists today. Moreover, the costs associated with this chaos are horrendous. While other periods in the region's recent history have seen very costly violence—the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War being probably the bloodiest—the costs of the past four years of violence in Syria alone may be just as high when all dimensions—the dead, wounded, and displaced as well as the destruction of Syria's infrastructure and economy—are taken into account.

Given the magnitude of today's regional chaos and its horrific costs and consequences, can the Middle East be put back together? This Brief addresses the following important questions: First, what are the dimensions of the region's current situation? Second, how did the Middle East come to such a dreadful state of affairs? And finally, can the region be restored? What are the obstacles facing any such effort, what resources are available to counter them, and what reforms would need to be implemented for any restoration of the region's states to succeed?

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The Dimensions of the Chaos

The first dimension of the current chaos in the Middle East is the decline of unitary actors and the increased number of failed states. States that were pillars of the Middle East—Syria and Iraq—have fragmented, and the number of failed states—Yemen, South Sudan, North Sudan, Somalia, Libya, and Afghanistan—is even greater.

A second dimension involves the number of different kinds of conflicts going on simultaneously. Some are primarily struggles for hegemony, the most salient of which is that between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Other conflicts are primarily about identity, whether ethnic or confessional (as in Lebanon). Clearly, the Shia-Sunni divide is rending much of Iraq and Syria. Finally, there are conflicts regarding control of natural resources, whether over oil in Iraq and Libya, or over water between Egypt and Ethiopia.

A third dimension of the chaos concerns the many different types of actors battling one another. In some corners of the Middle East, the armed forces of external powers are employed against local forces, as is the case when the air assets of the U.S., Russia, Britain, and France are bombing ISIS targets. In other areas, the regular forces of Middle East states are fighting non-state actors, as is the case when the Jordanian air force was deployed against ISIS in Iraq, or when the UAE conducted air operations against jihadists in Libya and sent ground forces to fight in Yemen.

In yet other battlegrounds in the Middle East, the fight seems to be between the remnants of regular forces of a former state and ethnic, tribal, or confessional forces, as is the case when Libyan army units gathered by General Khalifa Haftar battle a multitude of tribal-based militias. Still other battles are waged between different armed jihadi forces, as when the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front is fighting other units affiliated with ISIS in Syria. In still other cases, ethnic-based forces are fighting Islamic organizations, as is the case with Kurds battling ISIS in northeastern Syria. And then there are instances where tribal organizations have fought Islamic organizations, as was the case in Iraq's Anbar province, or where tribal-based militias are fighting one another, as is often the situation in Libya. The unique characteristics attached to each of these zones of combat creates huge confusion and makes it very difficult to assess the state of hostilities on the ground, or the parties' real endgame.

A fourth dimension is the mutations we see in armed conflicts—the transformation of conflicts from one type to another. This takes place, for example, when non-state actors branch out across state borders, as when ISIS established a territorial base across the Iraqi-Syrian border, thus transforming itself from an internal to a regional player. Or an internal group pledges allegiance to a larger entity, as when Beit al-Makdis in the Sinai Peninsula announced that it had joined ISIS. Or an internal or regional conflict is internationalized, as when the U.S. began to fly sorties against ISIS targets in Syria, or when Russia began to do the same against other opponents of the Assad regime.

A fifth dimension of the chaos concerns the heightened complexity of the region's economics, as manifested, for example, in the multitude of different economic entities: states, militias, terrorist organizations, and organized

crime mafias. Indeed, these economic entities now cross previously recognized national borders. Moreover, sub-state actors no longer depend on external financing to wage their fights; instead, they self-finance by trafficking and selling captured humans, natural resources like oil, as well as art and archeological artifacts. Finally, many of the ungovernable parts of the Middle East have seen an increase in the price of basic commodities, especially food, while the price of drugs has been dropping.

The sixth and final dimension of the recent developments in the Middle East concerns the heavy costs sustained by the region's populations since the onset of the Arab Spring. The number of dead is estimated to have reached 430,000, the number of wounded to have reached 2.5 million, and the number of displaced persons to have reached 14.3 million, among them some 11 million Syrians.

How Did We Get Here?

What trajectories and processes account for the region's unprecedented mayhem? Four developments seem to have led us to this point, almost in chronological order.

The Quest for Dignity
The first was the decades-long failure of Arab states to meet the expectations of many of their citizens, and particularly to meet their need to be treated with dignity. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, millions of Arabs would no longer tolerate the incompetence and corruption characterizing many Arab governments and state institutions, as well as the inability or unwillingness of those governments to treat their citizens with respect. Indeed, by 2010, the anger at these phenomena in many Arab streets had reached a point where the governments' possession of suppressive means could no longer keep the public in submission: The "fear barrier" had been broken.

The resulting first phase of the Arab Spring was romantic: Millions of idealistic Arab youth took to the streets. Mobilized and organized by means of state-of-the-art social media, the process was synergistic: The experience in Tunisia informed the experience in Egypt, which in turn influenced developments in Libya and Yemen—and they affected events in Syria. And events in each of these countries influenced those in countries that had inspired them.

Violence, and Islam Asserts a Role
The next phase was marked by violence, taking many forms. Some was perpetrated by criminals who broke out of jails in the thousands—including many (particularly in Egypt) who belonged to Islamic organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as elements of Hamas and Hezbollah, Al Jamaa Al-Islamiya, and other jihadi groups; some of this violence took the form of setting police stations and other public buildings on fire. Other violence was carried out by rulers like Syria's Bashar al-Assad who were determined that to avoid a slippery slope no ground should be yielded, and all the means of the state's monopoly of force should be employed to suppress the protests, regardless of the cost.

The breakdown of governmental institutions in some areas and the ensuing violence in other quarters of the Arab world led to the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood—notably in Egypt and to a lesser extent in Libya, Yemen, and Syria—and to the appearance of more extreme jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS in other countries and territories. In the vacuum created by the disappearance of decades-old institutions, these extremely well organized religious movements drew on their previous experience in developing parallel state institutions, and utilized their proficiency in moving their forces with record speed from one location to another to inflict on their adversaries one tactical if not strategic surprise after another.

An Old/New Player: The Military
In Egypt, the struggle over the country's identity between those who were seen as seeking to transform it into a religious state and those who viewed themselves as guardians of the civic state system had become existential. As at past historical junctures, the Army now became a central player—as had been the case all along in Tunisia, where the military remained steadfast in preventing a breakdown of state institutions. Their respective militaries also remained fiercely loyal to the monarchs in Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the small GCC states, allowing them to avoid the fate of the Arab republics. In some instances this was associated with one monarch's providing assistance to another, as was the case in 2011, when Saudi Arabia and the GCC moved forces to Bahrain.

American Retreat?
Another contributing factor was the perception in the Middle East that the U.S. was retreating from the region, creating a vacuum to be filled. That vacuum was less likely to have resulted from a deliberate "pivot to Asia" of the sort proposed by President Barack Obama and was more likely a by-product of the cumulative fatigue of two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, that cost thousands of U.S. dead and wounded as well as something like two trillion dollars, with little to show for it. By November 2008 these experiences had produced a risk-averse U.S. president who was determined to terminate America's heavy deployments in the Middle East and to avoid further entanglements. Consequently, initiatives such as the suggested early

involvement in Syria were rejected if the associated odds of unintended consequences could not be reduced below what the Obama team considered an acceptable level. Indeed, it seemed that America's Middle East policy was now subject to one overarching imperative: to avoid what Obama called "doing 'stupid stuff.'"

The vacuum created by U.S. reticence was filled by a less restrained Iran, which is now seen as exercising inordinate influence over the government in Baghdad, and whose Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, led by General Qassem Suleimani, is now at the front lines of the fights against ISIS in Iraq and against ISIS and other rebels in Syria as well as fighting in support of the Houthis in Yemen. And serving as Iran's proxy, Hezbollah, for the first time in its history beginning with the April 2013 battle of Qusayr, has shifted some of its best forces from 'resistance' to Israel in south Lebanon to an effort to reverse Bashar al-Assad's fading fortunes in Syria. At a cost of hundreds of casualties but at the same time gaining experience in conducting offensive combat operations, Hezbollah is now deeply invested in serving as Iran's proxy in Syria.

The deal recently concluded between the P5+1 and Iran over Iran's nuclear efforts may only exacerbate these realities. With sanctions lifted and assets unfrozen, Iran is expected to have additional means to expand its reach to other corners of the Middle East. In some of these corners, comprising arenas of low-tech warfare, these additional financial means may yet prove decisive. In the eyes of many Sunni Arabs, even more worrisome is the political fallout of the deal: It is viewed as having bestowed upon Iran recognition as a fully legitimized regional power.

Restoring the Region: Liabilities

Given existing circumstances, putting the fractured Middle East back together seems like a "mission impossible." Indeed, any effort to do so would face a number of very significant liabilities. The most immediate of these is the perceived diminished U.S. interest in the region, which makes any *Pax Americana* an impractical dream. Hence, any new design based on re-creating the role that the U.S. played in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War or the 1991 Gulf War, or when it convened the Geneva Peace Conference in 1974, the Camp David Summit in 1978, or the Madrid Conference in 1991, is simply unrealistic.

Nor has the world scene produced an architect of the stature required to put the pieces of the Middle East back together, notwithstanding the stamina demonstrated by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in bringing the negotiations with Iran to conclusion. Even the grand architects of the 1970s and early 1990s—Kissinger and Baker—did not face a challenge as great as today's totally fractured Middle East.

Another problem is that some of the most horrifically deadly players in today's Middle East are showing remarkable resilience. This is especially so with respect to ISIS, which not only transformed itself from a terror organization to a proto-state, but has put in place state institutions that have allowed it to rule vast territories spanning large parts of Syria and Iraq—including the latter's second largest population center—for the past two years.

Such resilience, moreover, is reinforced by the very large number of terrorist groups that span the entire Middle East, in all of its arenas and all of its theaters of operations: in Syria\Iraq, Yemen, the Sinai Peninsula, and Libya and other states of the Maghreb, as well as in the Horn of Africa and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. While these groups do not necessarily constitute a network, their large number and geographical expanse make challenging them very demanding indeed.

A final significant liability is the persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and of the Palestinian-Israeli dimension of that conflict in particular. Though Arab governments have displayed increasing fatigue with the conflict and have conveyed a willingness to prioritize their separate competing interests ahead of their solidarity with the Palestinians, Arab publics remain sensitive to what is widely viewed as the plight of the Palestinians and their unending status "under occupation."

The continued salience of the Arab-Israeli conflict has two relevant implications. First, it complicates the participation of Israel in any concerted effort to address the region's challenges. And second, in the absence of a solution, the conflict erupts from time to time in intense outbreaks of violence, taxing the time and energy of the region's leaders. This is especially true when the epicenter of such violence is in hypersensitive Jerusalem.

Restoring the Region: Assets

While the significant liabilities facing any effort to reconstruct the Middle East should not be underestimated, ignoring the available assets and opportunities would be equally erroneous. The first of these assets is that so far and without exception, all of the region's monarchies have remained intact. Though an explanation of this interesting phenomenon is beyond the scope of this Brief, there is at least some suggestive evidence that it has something to do with the greater sensitivity that monarchies have

shown to the "mood on the street," and their willingness and ability to react to expressions of that mood before they reach a breaking point. Whatever the explanation, however, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the small GCC states, taken together, provide a basis for a possible reconstruction of the rest of the region.

Joining the monarchies is Egypt, the largest and most populous of the Arab states, and the only Arab state whose history dates back thousands of years. Together, Egypt and the monarchies constitute the backbone of what could constitute a new pro–status quo regional coalition—a *Concert of Arabia*, along the lines of the Concert of Europe that came into being in post-Napoleonic Europe (1814–15). While yet to be negotiated and formalized, this coalition should be based on three interrelated principles: the sanctity of state sovereignty and state borders; the guaranteeing of minority rights; and decentralization—a form of government that provides greater autonomy to its constituent parts.

A third potential asset is that whereas in previous decades, Israeli interests converged with those of one or another Arab state regarding a specific issue, for the first time in the region's history, Israel and a large number of Arab states now have identical interests, at least with regard to two important issues: the perceived Iranian threat, and the dangers posed by the proliferation of terror movements and groups in the region. Indeed, this convergence of interests seems to transcend sectarian lines: Israel and Saudi Arabia share very similar perceptions of Shia Hezbollah, while Israel and Jordan see eye to eye with regard to the dangers represented by Sunni ISIS.

Fully integrating Israel within the Middle East would enable the pooling of the resources of the region's monarchies with those of its largest and most populous Arab republic, and of Israel. Surely, such an expanded *Concert of Arabia* could provide a robust base from which it would be possible to gradually draw larger and larger areas away from what now constitutes the ungovernable part of the Middle East and back to the orbit of rational policy making.

Resolving the Conflict

While the persistence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a significant barrier to the realization of the suggested broader *Concert of Arabia*—one that includes Israel—such a coalition may be the only possible avenue to resolving the conflict. In this context, the countries making up the *Concert* can do three things. First, they can operationalize the Arab Peace Initiative (the offer put forward by the Arab League at its 2002 summit in Beirut which called for full Israeli withdrawal from the territories it has occupied since 1967 in exchange for the Arab states signing peace agreements and ending their conflict with Israel) by spelling out the rewards that Israel might expect to accrue in exchange for each step it might take toward the realization of the different parameters of the API.[1] They can likewise provide the Israeli public with a very clear picture of the rewards that Israel would receive in terms of its relations with the Arab members of the *Concert* were it to do its share toward resolving the conflict.

Finally, members of the *Concert* could direct their defense officials, active and retired, to engage their Israeli counterparts in detailed discussions about the manner in which Israel's security requirements could be addressed in a fashion that would be consistent with the Palestinians' quest for real independent statehood. This would in turn require Israel to meet its own obligations toward resolving the conflict: specifically, ending its occupation of the Palestinians in a manner consistent with President Clinton's December 2000 "parameters," with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, with President George W. Bush's June 2002 Rose Garden speech, and with President Barack Obama's May 2011 "terms of reference" speech at the U.S. Department of State.

While the mobilized and committed minority of Israelis wedded to the concept of "Greater Israel" would never be persuaded to make the territorial concessions that would allow Palestinian independent statehood, the *Concert of Arabia* could address two fears that paralyze the majority at the center of the Israeli political map. The first is the fear that the withdrawal required of Israel would jeopardize its security and survival. And the second is the deep suspicion that no matter how far-ranging the concessions that Israel would be prepared to make in response to the Arab states' stated promises of peace, in the end, the Arab peoples—educated for decades on a narrative that regards Israelis as "colonizers"—will never see Israel as a legitimate state.

The first of these fears could be addressed by defense planners and security officials of the *Concert of Arabia* states, both active and retired, engaging their Israeli counterparts to devise a joint plan to secure Israel that would not be at the expense of realizing the Palestinians' quest for statehood. Important homework for such a plan was done by U.S. General (ret.) James Jones in 2007–8 and by U.S. General (ret.) John Allen in 2013–14. Cooperation in devising such a plan would also build on the trust that Israeli, Egyptian, and Jordanian security and defense officials have developed toward one another during the past few years of coordinating steps the three countries have taken to address threats of terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula and in southern Syria.

The second Israeli concern could be met by the *Concert of Arabia* states assuring Israel that once it meets its obligations and allows the Palestinians independent statehood, the *Concert* will formally recognize the state of Israel and declare the aspirations of the Palestinian and Jewish national movements as having been realized. The Arab-Israeli conflict would thereby finally end, with the gap between the Israeli and Arab narratives about the conflict finally closed.

The approach suggested here for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict thus differs in two important ways from past peacemaking efforts. First, it puts the *Concert of Arabia* states at the forefront: if not substituting for the United States, then at least playing as significant a role as Washington in this effort. Second, it focuses on the security issue not as one among a number of Israeli-Palestinian permanent status issues, but as the key to enabling the Israeli reciprocity necessary to allow the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The effect could be similar to that produced by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's acknowledgment of Israel's security concerns and Egypt's engagement with those concerns, which opened the door to Israel's eventual complete withdrawal from the Sinai and the removal of all its settlements there.

Tilting the Balance: The Need for Reform

No effort to restore the Middle East will sustain the test of time if the region's states, including the *Concert of Arabia* states, will not reform. Without such reform, upheavals such as those experienced in the Middle East since late 2010 will recur with varying degrees of violence.

The first of these necessary reforms is socioeconomic: the need to vastly expand the Arab states' middle class. In turn, this would require massive deregulation of the Arab states' overregulated economies and the building of viable institutions to undergird market economies. The resulting economic growth would allow the utilization of existing human capital and help to address the overeducation malignancy: the existence of hundreds of thousands of university graduates who cannot find gainful employment in the Arab states' stagnant economies.

A second dimension of the required reforms would be the building of social capital, requiring the engagement of a broad spectrum of civil society organizations. In Egypt alone there are some 45,000 such organizations, and as Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux has shown, even in war-torn Libya, over 1,100 such organizations were active as late as 2013.[2] While human rights organizations that document injustices and abuses must be encouraged, this should not be at the expense of engaging the thousands of other civil society organizations working to build social capital in the Middle East.

A third dimension of required change is security sector reform. Though denying past and present abuses, and the extent to which such abuses deprive individuals of their dignity, is surely pointless, reforming the security sector should be based on the working assumption that more often than not, manifestations of brutality are the outcome of lack of training and resources. It should also be noted that in a number of Arab Spring countries, notably Egypt and Tunisia, the army and security forces sided with the people, while in Syria they split, depriving its brutal regime of major assets. Hence, efforts to abate the human rights violations should be based on engaging members of this sector in training programs focused on ways of meeting the requirements of state security without resorting to extreme measures.

A final realm in which reform is required is religion. Rolling back radical Islamists will require a "war of ideas," the focus of which should be a massive effort to demonstrate that fanaticism, hatred, and violence contradict the basic tenets of Islam. As tens of thousands of young Islamists are inspired by radical, hateful, and extreme interpretations of their religion, battling radicalism will require engaging with those interpretations and debunking them. Such a task can be undertaken only by those whose command of the scriptures is at least as detailed and complete as that of those propagating the call for jihad. Some such efforts are already underway in Tunisia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, involving both religious and non-religious institutions and including the media as well as civil society organizations.

Summing Up

Given the degree of mayhem currently engulfing the Middle East, seeing the region as hopeless is understandable. This widely held view is only reinforced by the many obstacles that would confront any effort to restore the region—especially the absence of the United States, which for decades served as the "responsible adult" in the region. Yet, as pointed out in this Brief, the region is not entirely without assets that could be mobilized for such a mission. Most important among these are the conditions allowing for the creation of a broad coalition of states that could spearhead positive change—a *Concert of Arabia*. While including Israel in such a coalition would require that significant progress be made toward resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, realizing the *Concert*'s full positive

potential would also necessitate that its member states be willing to address an equally formidable challenge: the need for significant internal reform.

Endnotes

1   Abdel Monem Said Aly and Shai Feldman, Ecopolitics: Changing the Regional Context of Arab-Israeli Peacemaking (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, August 2003).

2   "Libya's Untold Story: Civil Society amid Chaos," Middle East Brief, no. 93 Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, May 2015.*

*Weblinks are available in the online version at
www.brandeis.edu/crown

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