



**Trends Transforming the Middle East:**

**From Wars to Religious Intolerance**

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The Middle East today is undergoing a period of profound transition that is re-shaping the region in ways that challenge a long-standing, but no longer sustainable status quo.

There are failed or failing states in Libya and Yemen, a raging civil war in Syria involving an array of regional and global actors, and ongoing instability in Iraq. Egypt has returned to a familiar style of stability under an authoritarian regime but faces serious domestic challenges and a violent terrorist threat, especially in the Sinai.

The role of **political Islam** continues to be fiercely contested in the aftermath of the 2010-11 uprisings, and these divisions and competing visions, drive much regional discord, as most recently manifested in the Qatar boycott that began in June 2017.

Even many of the more stable countries in the region - are undergoing a period of rapid social transformation and, in some ways, dislocation. The emergence of wealthier and a more educated middle class, the revolution in the media and information landscape, pressures and influences from a globalizing international culture and economy, and the ambitions all this has inspired in a more connected and worldly younger generation, have made unavoidable fundamental changes in how citizens will live, conduct business, and engage with the state and the world around them.

As we look around the region today, we witness mostly troubling events and currents that will likely shape or direct the future trajectory of the Middle East.

What impact will these forces of upheaval have on the culture and society of the Middle East as we know it?

Can regional Arab powers take a lead in defining the future of the Middle East?

Can, or should, the US continue to be the primary guarantor of regional order?

Will the structural changes we are witnessing today help the region integrate into the emerging global society, economy and culture -- or will it empower forces that promote insularity and disengagement from the outside world?

A trifecta of transformative events in recent years -- the aftermath of 9/11, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Arab uprisings of 2010-11 -- unleashed powerful and mostly dormant forces across the Middle East. The familiar status quo is being challenged by these forces almost everywhere in the region today:

- the legitimacy of established governments and states;
- borders that are threatened by conflicts and competing claims;
- non-state actors undermining and usurping the authority of central governments and/or controlling large swathes of territory;
- the rise of narratives that set sectarian, ethnic, national or other identity groups against each other and promote a paranoid and chauvinist view of the outside world, especially the West.

Compounding these challenges is a dearth of strong, credible leadership -- both individual and institutional -- that can unite peoples, mediate between regional powers and formulate a commonly accepted roadmap for the future. Such purposive and enlightened leadership is largely absent on a regional level and even wanting inside many, if not most, Middle Eastern states and societies.

While there are no clear answers to the many complex questions and issues facing the region, there are a number of key trends that are shaping it today and will clearly influence its future direction.

I would like to discuss five of the most important of them.

### **Trend #1: Youth and Role of Social Media:**

Nearly one-third of the Arab population today is aged 15-29, and another third is under the age of 15. This demographic tidal wave has huge implications for a range of domestic and regional issues. Young people throughout the Middle East, especially in the wealthy Gulf states, are engaging with one another – and with society as a whole – in radically new and often positive ways. They are increasingly turning their energy and creativity to the arts, culture, social media, and other venues of expression, often raising their voices against traditional power structures.

Where these youth movements may lead is at present unpredictable. But it is a huge challenge for all these societies, especially the less wealthy and more populous ones, to generate the jobs and economic opportunities these young people need and deserve. And that will be necessary if a major human resource is not to be wasted and these youths are allowed to either fester in disappointment and resentment or, worse, in frustration - turn

to crime or extremism.

### **Trend #2: Shi'a – Sunni Rivalry:**

Sectarian tensions are rising in the region and are a primary driving force in most of the current conflicts: in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen. Indeed, only in Libya is there a major conflict that does not include a significant sectarian component. These divisions, that are not historically typical, let alone unavoidable, are also key factors in the increasing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries. While the underlying causes of many of these conflicts and tensions are essentially political in nature, they are now largely defined by grievances in religious/sectarian terms to appeal to a broader base.

This means that unfortunately a generation of young people are growing up in a Middle East largely defined by zero-sum distinctions between sectarian camps - none of which are going to vanish or capitulate. Restoring stability in the Middle East will be extremely difficult if core religious and political identities are defined in terms of irreconcilable differences and enmity between neighbors.

### **Trend #3: GCC Countries Rising:**

With the traditional power centers of Egypt, Iraq and Syria weakened, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have risen to a leadership role in the Arab world that we have not seen in the past. We see a rising assertiveness, by the UAE, and particularly by Saudi Arabia, under King Salman and his son the CP, Mohamed bin Salman. The countries of the GCC are taking action in defense of their national interests and in an effort to expand their influence in the region while pushing back on Iran and its network of clients and proxies. The Saudi/Emirati joint intervention against the Houthis and Iranian influence in Yemen is just one example, but, unfortunately thus far, not a successful one. The conflict of which it is a part, has inflicted terrible suffering on the people of Yemen.

### **Trend #4: Migration & Refugees:**

All this conflict has resulted in large numbers of refugees and displaced persons throughout the region. This is a financial as well as humanitarian crisis and a disturbing change in the cultural fabric of the region. The immense impact of this trend will not be fully realized for many years, but it is already deeply troubling. The wars in Iraq and Syria have displaced almost half of the Syrian population and 4 million Iraqis. In Syria alone there are 5 million

refugees and 6.3 million internally displaced persons according to UN figures. In Yemen, there are over 3 million internally displaced persons.

- **Christian Migration:**

The trend of migration of Christians out of the Middle East continues as the largest Christian exodus in modern history -- primarily from Iraq, Egypt and Syria. Many are fleeing ancestral homes, in part due to discriminatory practices in many majority-Muslim societies, but far more in response to the rise of ultra-violent Islamist terrorist groups. While Christian migration from the ME is by no means new, it has significantly accelerated over the past two decades.

- This trend is tragic, not only for the Christian communities but for the Middle Eastern region as a whole. The exodus of Christians is radically changing the cultures of historically relatively open and tolerant societies like Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. Lost is the moderating effect that well-integrated minority ethnic and religious groups provide to mixed societies. Instead, these trends strengthen intolerant and more absolutist political and religious forces. Most of the Christians who are leaving under duress will never return. Their presence, role and influence will be gone forever, and the societies they leave behind will be impoverished by their absence.

The prospects of Christianity surviving in its birthplace appear grim, given the alarming recent statistics on Christian migration out of the ME:

- In 1910 Christians represented 13.6 percent of the Middle East's population but only 4.2% in 2010. By 2025, it is estimated they will constitute 3.6 percent of the region's population.
- Since the Arab uprisings in 2010-2011, Christians have faced increased attacks on individuals, churches and businesses. The reaction from the international community to this new wave of violence towards Christians has been minimal, and protection by local authorities, often inadequate at best.
- International monitoring groups estimate that nearly half of the Syrian Christian population of 2.5 Million have fled the country due to the civil war.
- The Christian population in Iraq under the Saddam regime had already dwindled by 2003 to 1.3 million and now, in the aftermath of the war has dropped to a shocking 300,000.
- Egypt is the home of the largest Christian community in the Arab world and one of the oldest anywhere, dating back at least 17 centuries. Today they still make up around 9 or 10 percent of the population of 105 million Egyptians.

**Egypt's Coptic community** has long been a target of Islamic extremists, and also discriminatory practices at the hands of fellow citizens as well as government officials. ISIS and ISIS-affiliated Egyptian jihadists have specifically targeted Egyptian Copts in an effort to portray them as a fifth column serving the interests of the west and of Israel against the Sunni majority.

Attacks against Egypt's Coptic community in recent years have been horrifying. From the savage beheading of 21 Copts on the shores of the Mediterranean in Libya by ISIL to the bombing of the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo in 2016 and the more recent attacks on Palm Sunday of last year in Alexandria and Tanta by Egypt's own home-grown terrorists.

While the Egyptian government repeatedly reiterates its support for the Christian community and denounces Islamist violence, some believe the government has been slow to take concrete actions to moderate the country's discriminatory laws and curb the some of the hate speech directed at Christians coming out of mosques and media outlets.

Unlike most of the countries in the Middle East, Egypt has a long history as a nation, dating back to Pharaonic times. This tradition and strong national identity has helped Egypt remain intact in spite of the many challenges it has faced over the past two decades. But unfortunately, it does little to protect the Christian community from terrorist attacks.

#### **Trend #5: US Influence Diminished:**

Washington's ability to influence events in the Middle East has diminished considerably over the past 15 years. The catastrophic consequences of the invasion of Iraq, the subsequent rise of ISIL and spread of extremism, the growing power of Iran and its mostly non-state regional proxies, the collapse of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and the ongoing 16-year war in Afghanistan, have all demonstrated Washington's inability to secure many of its key policy goals, let alone confer stability on the region.

To the contrary, the US is now viewed by many as a primary instigator of turbulence and instability rather than the primary guarantor of regional order as in the past. This prolonged period of war and violence has left many Americans with Mideast conflict fatigue, given the blood and treasure lost over the past 17 years. While understandable, that means we are now less committed to the region and there is a reluctance to formulate a comprehensive or coherent policy strategy beyond the all-too obvious imperative of fighting terrorism.

President Obama's main Middle East achievement was negotiating the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) with Iran and our European allies plus Russia and China. Yet this engagement with Iran, along with some comments he repeatedly made to the press, left many of our Mideast allies alienated from his administration -- particularly in the second term.

While the **Trump administration's** overall policy or strategy towards the region remains unclear after a year in office, there is definitely a change of policy towards Iran. Trump maintains his campaign position that the nuclear agreement "was the worst deal ever made" and has vowed to abandon it if it is not strengthened. His main criticisms of the JCPOA echo those of many Arab countries, that the deal does not address Iran's "meddling" in their domestic arena and its power projection in the Arab world through non-state proxies like Hezbollah, and that Iran's destabilizing conduct has continued, and in some ways, intensified after the agreement.

America's diminished influence in the region has left a power vacuum, that others are eager to fill. The most obvious is Russia which has returned as a major player in the middle east through a limited but highly successful joint intervention with Iran and its proxies in Syria. This ensured the survival of the Assad regime and allowed the Russians to consolidate and expand their military bases in Syria.

The Iranians also have benefitted, not only from the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, but also from the more recent US disengagement. Washington staying out of, or keeping at arm's length, many of the region's key conflicts like Yemen, Libya, and Syria, creates even more space for the expansion of Iranian influence.

Yet many of the challenges and conflicts facing the region today do not lend themselves to solutions by external powers. Russia's limited intervention in Syria, for instance, may serve Moscow's purposes, but provides no solution for the Syrian republic or people. Quite to the contrary, in fact.

Issues like the wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, the raging debate over the future role of political Islam, and the question of religious and sectarian tolerance all require primarily local and regional solutions. But such local solutions are difficult to envision given the number and depths of open conflicts, simmering tensions and deep differences that define a region largely in discord.

### **A new Saudi Arabia? And a push to a more "moderate Islam"**

In addition to the regional trends I've outlined, it is important to recognize that the transformation underway today in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, if successful, will have a hugely positive impact on the region and the Muslim world more broadly.

The new 32-year-old Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, is making history. He is re-structuring the kingdom from the top down with plans to:

- diversify the economy to reduce the country's dependency on revenue from oil with the national transformation plan dubbed "Vision 2030";
- end a culture of corruption and establish a new way of doing business as demonstrated in recent provocative actions against prominent royals and business tycoons;
- consolidate power by removing entrenched royal family figures from long-held positions and creating new institutions under his control;
- roll back the power of the clerics particularly in the social sphere; AND
- improve women's rights and open the society to outside influences in ways unheard of in Saudi history.

He is shaking things up in the kingdom with a strong constituency of public support among the youth who are clamoring for change and welcomed the tough actions taken against the system of corruption.

In addition to these extraordinary goals, MbS, as he is widely known, announced in October 2017, that he would return his country to "moderate Islam." He added that Saudi Arabia is "not normal" but he is determined to change that. For decades, with its oil wealth and as the custodian of the holy places in Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia has funded madrasas, mosques, training centers, and television channels that have had a massive impact on how Muslims the world over interpret and practice their faith.

The prospect that Saudi Arabia would not only promote a more moderate interpretation of Islam within its own society but also curtail its financial support for intolerant Islamic institutions outside of its borders has raised hopes that this new policy, if actually enacted, could lead to a decline in Muslim extremism and a rise of moderation.

Yet to transform the system of governance, and challenge long-held social, religious and cultural traditions, ruling by consensus is not an option - argue many of the CP's supporters. His admirers describe him as a powerful visionary determined to rebuild and re-define a new Saudi Arabia better suited for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His detractors see him as an authoritarian determined to forcefully squash any opposition, while taking great risks that may undermine the stability of the kingdom.

Mohamed bin Salman clearly sees himself as a ruler who will build a new era for Saudi Arabia and its youthful population, but it is certainly a high stakes gamble and it is too early to tell if he will succeed.

**I would like to close with a point to bring this home to us as Americans:  
What role should the US play in this period of transition in the ME?**

Despite its diminishing influence and leverage, the United States remains **the** key external power in the region and the preferred ally of most Arab countries and, of course, Israel. The U.S. can, and should, continue to play a leadership role by coordinating and supporting diplomatic efforts to end conflicts such as the ones in Yemen and Libya where political compromises are needed and not impossible to achieve. Drawing down US military operations and reducing our footprint should not mean political and diplomatic disengagement or allowing the creation of vacuums that a range of bad actors can easily exploit and eventually undermine our interests.

The region, now more than ever, needs to identify political, and diplomatic solutions, that would allow all the Arab countries, as well as Iran, Turkey and Israel, to build a prosperous and stable future for the region. I believe the leadership role of the US is essential for that effort to go forward, because we are still the only external power that enjoys the respect of, and has the bilateral relationships with all the key players, that would be necessary to accomplish that goal.

The question today is whether the current US administration has the bandwidth to understand the complexities of the current period of transition in the region **and** if it is interested in, or up to, this difficult but very important task.

Thank you.

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