

# Living with the Middle East's old-new security paradigm

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>>> Attention has gradually turned to the geopolitical implications of the Arab spring. It is broadly recognised that ongoing processes of change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are not just about domestic level political reform but also regional security dynamics. The region appears to be traversing a valley of heated tension and strategic flux. But no single, dominant organising principle has yet taken shape. A number of strategic frameworks capture parts of what is unfolding in today's Middle East; but each falls short in offering a complete account. An eclectic set of geopolitical dynamics conditions the region's post-Arab spring reshuffle. And a clash of logics may persist for some time to come. This may militate against the unequivocal prevailing of any singular, Western security approach to the region.

## ALTERNATIVE REGIMES

For many years before the Arab spring, the Middle East had the outward appearance of a clearly identifiable security system. Structural determinants seemed to predominate. These were the parameters bequeathed by departing colonial powers, then those of the Cold War. States were autocratic and permitted little popular sway over foreign policies; linkages across borders were relatively limited; civic agency was truncated; pan-regional Islamism proved illusionary; and there was assumed to be a neat division between pro- and anti-Western regimes that defined much of what happened in the region's geopolitics. While other regions made progress towards more cooperative security

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Changes in the Middle East go beyond domestic political reform to include also regional security dynamics.
- No strategic framework yet fully captures incipient dynamics in the region.
- The US and the EU must equip themselves to deal with a very diverse geopolitics in the new MENA.

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»»»»» arrangements and in some cases nourished an ethos of transnational networks, the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East seemed to remain irredeemably power-based. While the region gave birth to the most emblematic of 'non-state actors', by 2010 most regional analysts judged Al-Qaeda to be firmly on the back-foot and radical religious dynamics subjugated to state sovereignty primacy.

The pre-2010 reality, seething in ebb and flow under the region's manufactured surface stability, was undoubtedly more complex in practice. Notwithstanding this, there is now much speculation that post-Arab spring geopolitical dynamics are set fundamentally to change. A new phase of regional politics is probing and stretching itself into a reshaped mould. However, none of the possible types of organising frameworks fully captures incipient dynamics in the Middle East. On a still partially sketched canvas, there remains much that is old in the new Middle East.

**Hobbesian power plays.** The advent of political reform has not over-turned power-oriented *realpolitik*. Indeed, the unpredictability of the region's shifting sands actually finds expression in an even stronger (re-)balance of power dynamic. Big power, state-to-state rivalry has not disappeared and may even be a more powerful force in the new Middle East. Much diplomacy reflects national power-mobilisation strategies, in the name of standard national interests, not religious commonalities, the interests of a particular regime type, or those of a Western or anti-Western block. This explains the multi-directional and overlapping rivalries involving Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran and Algeria, and how these states now manoeuvre to shore up their national positions.

However, this does not mean that Hobbesian accounts can yet be granted exclusive or absolute predominance. While balance of power rivalry is set to be an important trend, it is premature to assume that national diplomacies are now animated by a highly belligerent nationalism. There will be an element of competitive

multipolarity in the new Middle East: there will not be a single dominant power but clusters of shifting coalitions between medium-sized powers. Yet state-as-black-box multipolarity will itself be tempered by the diverse trends that now deepen across the region. Power politics is overlain with a multiplicity of emerging fault lines. A mix of cross-cutting national, denominational, tribal, political and ethnic cleavages is evident. Curiously, power-politics co-exist with what many in the region believe is the weakening hold of national identities.

**Democracy-autocracy cleavage.** Some argue that the emerging and likely dominant organising logic in the new Middle East is that of a division between reformist and non-reformist states. Many predict that those states implementing democratic change will begin to ally on reform issues with each other. Those states resisting democratisation are likely to band together to prevent the spread of revolution. Some experts argue that differentiated domestic processes of change open the region to a broader global rivalry between Western democracies and non-Western rising powers: they aver that Middle Eastern states are now more likely to be drawn into competing sides of a zero-sum geopolitical battle between the West and authoritarian states led by China and Russia.

This scenario is likely to prove too stark to encapsulate the multifaceted shifts afoot in the post-2011 Middle East. New democracies are unlikely to become highly proactive or proselytising exporters of democracy to other parts of the region. They are likely to combine internal reform with broadly 'sovereignist' foreign policies. Even new Arab democrats are drawn to China and Russia in their challenge to Western dominance of the global order. And conversely, reform-resistant states, especially in the Gulf, have if anything become more dependent on Western backing. Moreover, there are only two states that have made meaningful progress towards democratisation; and both Tunisia and Egypt have sought to build not dismantle bridges with non-reforming states. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have

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promised support to Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen to ensure that advances in democratisation do not work to their disadvantage. While GCC states are coordinating in defence of authoritarianism – the United Arab Emirates’ (UAE) and Saudi intervention in Bahrain is merely the best-known and most overt example of this – Qatar and Abu Dhabi have almost diametrically opposed positions towards the Muslim Brotherhood. All these variations will work to blur the clarity in any democracy-autocracy cleavage. For the moment, it is unconvincing to see the region as magnifying a global dichotomy between democracies and non-democracies.

**Cooperative security.** Is the Middle East moving towards being a more liberal regional order? Arab states are certainly looking to deepen trade and investment interdependencies within the region. Gulf investments in North Africa have increased. The Arab Maghreb Union may be spluttering back into life. The Arab League is enjoying a renaissance. The ‘5 plus 5’ forum has been injected with a new lease of life. The GCC has debated modest steps forward in formal integration. Some analysts detect in the Arab spring

the green shoots of a regional consciousness that enjoys a more genuine legitimacy than regimes’ previously hollow and manufactured pan-Arabism. The density of exchanges between reformers in different parts of the region has thickened. Civil society organisations in the region insist there has been a notable ‘contagion’ of reform dynamics across borders and growing contacts between youth movements from different states. Muslim Brotherhood affiliates cooperate across borders. Moreover, while most stress has been placed on the domestically-driven nature of recent political trends, the MENA region’s inter-linkages with broader international factors are thickening not weakening; contrary to the gist of much current commentary, the longer-

term trajectory is of deeper interdependencies rather than autarchy.

Positive potential for a more inter-linked security community certainly exists along all these vectors. However, all the indicators of interdependence, transnational networks and cooperative security for the moment remain anaemic. Governments in the region still need to follow through on their commitments to facilitate cross-border exchanges of all types. Regional integration schemes are painfully halting – aspirational more than actual. In some ways, sharper popular pressures now oblige governments to meet very prosaic and directly national objectives, often entailing competition with other parts of the region. Cosmopolitan linkages have not tangibly weakened nation-state primacy – at least, not yet. The MENA remains less of a united and socially-rooted security community than most other regions.

**Non-state actor radicalism.** Cross-border networks are not only those of wired reformers. Events, especially in the Sahel, Algeria and Libya indicate that Al-Qaeda’s loosely-bound affiliates also seem to have gained a new momentum. It is not clear that this is a regional trend consequent to the Arab spring *per se*, however. The way that power vacuums in the Sahel, and Mali in particular, have burnished a new wave of jihadism is undoubtedly of acute concern. Others point to events in the Sinai, the rise of Salafi militia and Hezbollah’s role in Lebanon as further evidence of the rise in non-state actorness. But it would be a stretch to argue that this portends a new region-wide ascendancy of non-state-actor radicals, as opposed to being driven by country-specific factors in the Sahel. The over-riding narrative of the Arab spring – however beleaguered the hopes of reform now stand – remains one that challenges the Al-Qaeda narrative. Most experts on the region are convinced that mainstream Islamist parties now operate as nationally-rooted organisations, not in the name of pan-regional religious projects.

**Sunni versus Shia.** It has become commonplace to point out that the Arab spring has unleashed more virulent rivalry between Sunni and Shia – to

## There remains much that is old in the new Middle East

»»»»» the point that some now feel this to be the region's increasingly pre-eminent structural feature. The Syrian conflict in particular is invariably interpreted as a manifestation of this dynamic, as is Lebanon's internal strife. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are widely seen as expressly boosting and galvanising ascendant Salafis in Lebanon to challenge Hezbollah's armed predominance, presuming Bashar al-Assad's eventual demise to represent a moment of opportunity to weaken the Shia resistance movement. The Gulf States invited Morocco and Jordan to join the GCC as an effort to boost a geostrategic Sunni alliance. Turkey is similarly assumed to be positioning itself as leader of such a Sunni block. In turn, Iran is assumed to be motivated primarily by Shia solidarity in Syria and southern Lebanon. Some experts see sectarian strife opening the way to a redrawing of national borders – in a domino-effect undoing of the MENA's entire post-colonial state structure.

Again, however, this narrative is not as close a fit as is now routinely presumed. In fact, we see a mix of some Sunni states pushing assertive containment of Iran and others pursuing policies of more positive engagement and enticement. Iraq has not joined Iran in a combative 'Shia arc', as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki struggles to consolidate his domestic power base. It is doubtful that cooperation between different Gulf States is harmonious enough in Lebanon to represent a concerted Sunni challenge to Hezbollah. Turkey and the Gulf States cooperate but remain wary of each other's pretensions. The Sunni-Shia divide is sometimes clearly manufactured, or at least exaggerated by regimes as a tool of self-legitimation and -survival. Rather than a deeply-rooted sociological reality, it often appears to be used instrumentally by regional powers to advance their own interests. Moreover, the Sunni-Shia relation is not a purely adversarial one, as some factions will often ally opportunistically around nationally-specific objectives and against other actors. The fiercest incipient rivalry may in fact be between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudi-Wahhabi propelled transnationalism of Salafist networks.

Overall, sectarianism is present but not the overriding feature of the reshaped Middle East.

**Pro- versus anti-Western divisions.** As an outgrowth of the democracy-autocracy cleavage, much comment ponders which states have become more pro-Western and which more anti-Western as a result of the Arab spring. This traditional lens on the region is, however, increasingly out of tune with a far more variegated set of local identities and interests. Debates in the post-2011 Middle East take place on a different metric to that of pro-versus anti-Westernism. Contrary to much received wisdom, new popular influence over foreign policy – in those select places where it has emerged – cannot be seen as synonymous with a more widespread and malign anti-Westernism. While undoubtedly cool and critical towards Western powers, Arab citizens seem to demand of their governments better fulfilment of core economic interests and claims on social justice, more than anti-Western posturing. President Morsi courts China; but as Western states do exactly the same, it is not clear why this should be admonished as a threat to the West. Overall, Western influence is diminishing. States no longer define themselves in accordance with the US-Iran stand-off. Arguably, similarly competing positions in relation to Israel and Palestine are also losing at least some of their central definitional or constitutive force in regional geopolitics. Today, MENA states appear far more concerned with positioning themselves in relation to changes within the region than with alignments towards external powers.

With such a multiplicity of dynamics not only co-existing but also even deepening, it is difficult to identify any clearly dominant structural logic to the emergent Middle East. The MENA is not the only region where contrasting geostrategic patterns co-exist. But its overlay of clashing organisational dynamics is especially daunting and devoid of any fulcrum-anchoring narrative. None of the alternative paradigms suggested here has yet crystallised in well-formed clarity and uncontested explanatory primacy. They rather represent different future options or possible paths of development; they are delineated here as

a means of assessing the structural reshaping of the post-Arab spring MENA region in a way that zooms out from the current cacophony and confusion of every-day events.

For the foreseeable future, the region's sub-textual remoulding is likely to hinge around the ways in which different organising logics combine with each other. The weight of each dynamic will vary in different parts of the region: for the Saudi regime Sunni-Shia rivalry dominates, while elsewhere this is less relevant; in Egypt the state remains omnipresent, while in places like Yemen and Syria the very concept of a national identity has frayed. The combination of Islamist networks, Sunni-Shia rivalry, interdependence and big power competition might be said to constitute a mishmash of 'religio-interpolarity'. Or a notion of identity-fractured non-polarity might be preferred to capture the absence of any strong geopolitical or normative anchoring in the new Middle East. There are grounds to hope for aspects of Middle Eastern liberal order; it is notable that more democratic internal politics may dovetail with and spur rules-based inter-state norms at a time when many detect a fracturing of the wider global liberal order. However, there are equally signs of both illiberal order (authoritarian resilience, but incipient regional rules-constrained integration) and liberal non-order (more democracy, but less cooperation). Indeed, a curious dislocation is that inter-state liberal order might recede even as political liberalisation advances in some Arab states; it is in this way that the region could constitute a microcosm of, rather than deviance from, broader global shifts.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE WEST?

Both the United States and the European Union (EU) frequently repeat that they are committed to shaping their policies around local, Arab expectations and views. After talking to scores of officials, politicians, activists, journalists and analysts in nine Middle Eastern states since the start of the Arab spring, this particular author is left less than fully illuminated about what such local

expectations actually are of outside players. Opinions run the full gamut; there is simply no agreed view of what the EU or US represent in terms of security identity or over the way they should act. Some 'local voices' extol European soft power, others lament that it is what effectively excludes the EU from serious influence. Some perceive the EU as unrealistically idealistic, others as a cynical exponent of manipulative *realpolitik*. Some want more outside engagement, others less. Some seek the deepening of civic networks with European and American counterparts, others (even many reformers) believe such liberal strategic cosmopolitanism to be laughably out of synch with an increasingly Darwinian Middle East.

The EU and the US should be wary of overlaying an eclectic set of geopolitical dynamics with any singular strategic narrative. This does not necessarily entail eschewing support for core universal values, but does caution against tactical parsimony. In the current MENA scenario, the US and EU must equip themselves to deal with a far more diverse geopolitics. On the one hand, an unreconstructed realism errs in down-playing the extent of new non-statist dynamics in the region. On the other hand, the extension of more post-modern, cooperative and networked approaches to security may prove premature given resistant 'sovereignism' in some parts of the region.

It is legitimate for outside powers to encourage cooperative security; but attempting to replicate EU-style cooperative integration is unlikely to gain traction if a high-level security engagement is not also moulded to the region's new conditions. Outside powers can and should work to deepen political reform, but are unlikely to be served well by prioritising a democracy-autocracy divide – or indeed to be in-tune with the region should they attempt to do so. But it would also be high-risk geopolitics for the EU or the US to place all their strategic eggs in the basket of Hobbesian power calculations, trying to pre-empt which states are likely to emerge most empowered. And basing strategy principally around a presumed Sunni-Shia divide will make such rivalry more likely to deepen than need be the case.



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»»»» It will be tempting for outside powers to grasp a dynamic that appears dominant at a particular moment and build a regional strategy around that. Rather, the key will be to assess how all of the above dynamics are likely to play a part in the region and, crucially, how they condition each other. This will place a premium on understanding the impact of different strands of geostrategy on each other, to ensure that negative dynamics are not unnecessarily magnified. It will not make for a neat, one-principled geostrategy.

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