

## Trends in a tumultuous region

### Middle East after the Arab Awakening

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Two years ago, what began as the individual protest of an aggrieved fruit seller in Tunisia exploded into the ‘Arab Awakening’—multiple, massive popular uprisings that swept across the Middle East. People-powered revolutions lopped the heads of governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya in quick succession. Dictatorships that had been in power for decades were swept aside, some in a matter of weeks. The Arab Awakening also ushered in mass protests in Jordan, Morocco, Iran, Lebanon, Bahrain and other Gulf states with varying degrees of success in bringing reform. It also begat the chaos that is Syria, where protests elicited a violent government crackdown that quickly descended into sectarian civil war.

The region today is at best in flux and at worst in turmoil. What began as a positive story of peaceful revolutions has deteriorated into political mayhem, instability and war. There are a



Members of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of ousted President Mohamed Morsi demonstrate outside the Qobba Presidential Palace on 6 September 2013 in Cairo, Egypt. Thousands of supporters turned out despite a sustained crackdown on Islamists by the country's new authorities. AFP PHOTO/MOHAMMED ABDEL MONEIM via AAP.

number of constitutional challenges in many of these countries, political jockeying, violence and sectarian tensions. The economic and social problems that drove the initial protests haven't got better but worse. The civil war in Syria, a popularly sanctioned military coup in Egypt, continued violence in Iraq and Libya and constitutional uncertainty in Tunisia have erased any hope of a seamless transfer to open societies and governments responsive to the people. The lofty expectations of the revolutions have yet to be fulfilled.

Two years after the start of the Arab uprisings, the Middle East remains as tumultuous as ever. The dynamic nature of the post-revolutionary period makes it difficult to predict what shape the future of the region will take. However, despite the uncertainty and flux, a number of emerging trends will influence the region in the post-revolutionary period and well into the future. Unfortunately, these trends do not bode well for a region already in turmoil.

The first is a marked uptick in sectarianism and sectarian violence. This is true not only in the obvious places, such as Iraq and Syria, but in Egypt and Yemen. Religious minorities are in precarious positions in many countries, and the Shia–Sunni divide is widening across the region. National sectarian conflicts aren't contained within their countries, but have far-reaching regional implications, especially in the case of Syria, which is fast becoming a regional proxy war.

The second trend is a crisis within political Islam and a widening rift between secular and Islamist political forces. After decades in opposition and under persecution by authoritarian regimes, Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia deftly inserted themselves into political openings afforded by the overthrow of those same regimes in the immediate post-revolutionary period.

However, once in power, they quickly squandered their opportunity. They governed ineptly and in a majoritarian, even authoritarian, manner, alienating a sizable majority of their populace. After only one year in office, Egypt's Islamist president Mohamed Morsi was overthrown by a popularly backed military coup and his Muslim Brotherhood organisation was crushed by state security forces who arrested key leaders and violently broke up their demonstrations, killing hundreds of their supporters. The state is now moving to outlaw the group outright. Despite the return of the deep state in Egypt and the undemocratic nature of the Muslim Brotherhood's ouster, this was done with the popular backing of most Egyptians.

The result has been a newly radicalised political Islamist movement and politically polarised society. Similarly in Tunisia, Ennahda's collaboration with ultraconservative *salafi* parties, who have been found responsible for a number of political assassinations of secular politicians, has alienated them further from secular Tunisians and has thrown the constitutional process into disarray. We also see greater radicalisation of political Islamist elements throughout the region, from Libya to Syria, where jihadist elements are gaining a foothold in those lawless frontiers.

The third trend is the gradual disengagement and declining influence of the US in the Middle East. Eager to end its decade-long two-front wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and with declining leverage throughout the region, the Obama administration is in quietist mode. However, the United States' reluctance to get involved in the Syrian conflict and its ambivalent stance on the political developments in Egypt, as well as its disengagement from Libya after the Benghazi debacle, has hurt its standing and compromised its position as guarantor of Western interests in the region.

## The revolutionary road

Before the Arab Awakening, the Middle East was a troublesome but fairly stable if not stagnant region of the world. The region was ruled by a number of monarchies and police states run by dictatorial regimes, many of which had been in power for over 30 years. Those regimes kept their populations' passions in check, regional alliances and treaties intact and the jihadist threat and Islamist parties more or less at bay. The region wasn't in any positive sense moving forward, but everyone knew the rules of the game and more or less what to expect. The international community knew which actors it had to work with, how much it could push on reforms and who it could cut deals with.

Middle East watchers knew of the deep-seated economic, political and demographic challenges and agreed that reform was desperately needed. However, no-one thought that those challenges would explode so unexpectedly and spontaneously in the Arab Awakening. After all, the Middle East had been slowly festering in its problems for decades—quick and decisive action wasn't expected. Many analysts thought that the Middle East's problems would continue to decay its societies but that the ruling elite would keep their stranglehold on power. Arab regimes had perfected the police state. Popular protests had been brutally shut down before. The speed and severity of the successive revolutions took everyone by surprise.

But one only had to peruse the annual UN Arab Human Development reports researched and written by Arab political scientists to realise that there was lava rising beneath this seemingly dormant landscape. The reports were eerily similar year after year, finding the region failing or vulnerable on numerous fronts—environmental stresses, lack of sustainable health and security, stagnant and inequitable economic development, political repression and lack of civil society, unsustainable demographics. As the decade wore on, the reports found these fault lines deepening.

Most significantly, the latest UN Arab Human Development report (issued in 2009, just a year and a half before the uprisings) found that Arab governments were not only underperforming for their citizens but that they themselves had become 'threats' to the human security of their citizens. The report concluded that 'large and frequent shortfalls in these areas often combine to turn the state into a threat to human security instead of its chief support.' Arab governments had little positive connection to their citizenry and were becoming increasingly insignificant and less able and willing to move their region forward.

The demographic bubble was a huge driver of the Arab revolutions. The Middle East is one of the youngest regions in the world. More than 60% of its 380 million people are under 29. The median age is 22: in some countries it's younger. By 2050, this population will double. Egypt's burdened by a 30% youth unemployment rate. In Algeria, an untenable 46% of young people are unemployed.<sup>1</sup> All of these youth were ready to enter the workforce and marriage and desired to fully participate in society but saw none of that available to them.

The youth linked the limbo they were living in—their inability to get a better education, hold jobs and get married—to the wastefulness of the ruling powers. Arab rulers weren't only squandering the future of their countries. They were squandering the personal future of young people by not educating them properly, by failing to build an economy that would create jobs and by stifling people's voices through political repression.<sup>2</sup> For the youth, it became personal. And, as we know, the personal is political. Arab citizens, particularly the youth, came to view the ruling elites not only as profligate but as threats to their personal futures.

This generation also grew up in a time of unprecedented access to information and ability to communicate via the internet, satellite and social networking technologies. It was plugged into the outside world and knew that there was a better alternative, that others had freedoms and opportunities, and it wanted that for its societies as well.

The youth who drove the revolutionary protests were also aware that traditional opposition politics wouldn't get them anywhere because of the repressive nature of the regimes. What political opposition parties existed were old-fashioned, secretive and ultimately useless, so they turned instead to cyberspace to organise and to air grievances.

Arab youth began to address social and political problems issue by issue, raising awareness and mobilising through social networking. With this type of activity, there's no party platform or organisation to sustain. Individuals mobilised as the need arose and when the opportunity presented itself. That way, they were able to bypass government repression by not having a fixed presence and organisational hierarchies.

Technology gave an open space where the people could freely interact in ways they couldn't in the physical realm. Cyberspace was open and transparent, provided forums for free expression and gave immediate access to information uncensored by the state. It stood in stark contrast to the authoritarian reality they were living in and it transformed their expectations and abilities.<sup>3</sup>

It was from this background that the revolutions sprang. The initial movements were led largely by idealistic youth groups that hoped to transform their societies into more participatory, more open and democratic ones. Theirs was a liberal and secular agenda, powered by an optimistic belief in technology and the spontaneous ability of people to come together to achieve a goal without traditional politics. Wael Ghonim, one of the youth leaders of the revolutionary protests, articulated this sentiment in a TEDx talk given weeks after Mubarak was removed from power. In the initial afterglow of the revolution, he said 'we are going to win because we don't understand politics. We are going to win because we are willing to stand up for our dreams. Egyptians felt freedom approaching. The power of the people is much stronger than people in power.'

Ghonim reflected a sentiment that was prevalent among the protesters—that they were above politics. The youth groups that drove many of the initial protests had no clear strategy after removing dictators from power. They believed their success in accomplishing this goal would build momentum for seamless change.

But their belief that they were above politics turned out to be naive and cavalier. They had experience protesting, but little experience organising politically. The advantage of organising spontaneously and without institutional infrastructures turned into a liability once those authorities had been toppled. There were no institutional structures to support them or their goals. Once the old powers were gone, a huge political vacuum was left to be filled. Constitutions had to be rewritten, elections slated, civil organisations formed. These were monumental tasks that they were not prepared for.

In the transition period, the liberal vision of the revolutionary organisers began to slip away. In its place came a slow but steady Islamisation of the immediate post-revolutionary period in the Middle East. However, the Islamists' turn at power proved to be equally problematic. Having spent decades in opposition, they too were unable to transform themselves seamlessly into governing parties who could lead their countries during this fragile time and articulate an inclusive vision.

Instead, they proved politically tone deaf and particularly inept in managing day-to-day governance. Having been shaped under the autocratic environment they opposed, they were equally stingy with power, paranoid and non-inclusive in government. Once in power, they managed to quickly squander whatever goodwill they had built in opposition and it brought their swift downfall. The result of their failure to govern was a deep polarisation of their societies. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Egypt.

## Polarised politics of Islamists vs secularists

The post-revolutionary transition has been particularly chaotic and troublesome in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest Islamist political party, mostly stayed on the sidelines during the initial revolutionary protests. As an old-school opposition party used to operating in seclusion and under the constant threat of arrest and repression, it was wary of the unorganised people-powered protests and just as surprised by the speed with which the governments in Egypt and Tunisia fell.

In stark contrast to the impatient protesters, the Muslim Brotherhood had set out a slow-burn strategy for implementing its vision. Over the years, it sought to influence Egypt's institutions and slowly Islamise from within, focusing on social work and *da'wa*.<sup>4</sup> In order to survive as an organisation, it was just as secretive, hierarchical and slow-moving as the governments it opposed. It was acting from an abundance of caution, given its experience with past repression, and had no interest in a revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood in fact banned its members from participating in the protests in Tahrir Square until it was all but certain that Mubarak would go. Only then did the Brotherhood throw its support behind the revolution and take advantage of the political opening that the young secular protesters carved out.

The revolution presented the Muslim Brotherhood with an undeniable opportunity. It already had an operation in place to come out ahead in the parliamentary and presidential elections. Throwing out its previous cautious strategy, the Brotherhood jumped into the deep end of Egyptian politics. The Brotherhood contested a number of parliamentary seats, ran a candidate for president and dominated the constitutional drafting process. This was despite its public promises to seek a limited role in politics and not run a presidential candidate.

Although it didn't win an outright mandate, the Brotherhood governed as if it did, alienating many segments of Egyptian society who were sceptical of its Islamist vision. President Mohamed Morsi's tenure was markedly incompetent. Morsi failed to address any of Egypt's myriad of social and economic problems. He alienated the secular parties by refusing to compromise on their key concerns and generally behaved in the same authoritarian manner as previous Egyptian rulers, by jailing dissenters, pushing past the opposition and alienating ordinary Egyptians by arbitrary governance. Instead of instituting programs to solve bread and butter issues, the most pressing concerns for Egyptians, he continued to focus on Islamising programs that made the broader Egyptian society increasingly uncomfortable.

Morsi's tenure became untenable. A political movement called Tamarod, or 'Rebel', began gathering signatures for a no-confidence petition calling President Morsi to step down from power. It gathered over 20 million signatures and took to the streets in protest, with demonstrations that surpassed those of the original 2011 revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood, meanwhile, stood defiant in the face of such protests. It continued to insist that it represented the will of the majority, while the

protesters represented an old elite still smarting from its electoral defeats. But the protests spoke for themselves.

The Egyptian military, led by General Abdel Fatah al Sisi, saw the strength of the protests, the popular dissatisfaction with the Brotherhood and Morsi's rule in particular, and moved to remove him. As quickly as massive protests felled Mubarak, so too did they to Morsi, but this time barely less than a year after he took office. The military takeover was efficient and swift. Morsi was detained, as were key Brotherhood officials. Emergency rule was put in place, with the military once again promising a road map to transition to civilian rule.

Though the mechanics of regime removal were similar—massive protests that spurred military takeover—Egyptian society was now more fragmented and polarised. Deep divisions within Egyptian society that emerged when the Muslim Brotherhood assumed power grew during its tenure and widened into deep chasms when the military takeover removed it from power. Egyptian society polarised into two camps—pro- and anti-Brotherhood. Suspicions have turned to hatreds, fuelled by a similarly polarised media landscape.

The Brotherhood's rush to power and its failure to build coalitions and articulate a unified vision for Egypt deeply alienated millions of Egyptians. But the military coup, despite its popularity, also alienated a sizable minority of Egyptians, mostly of Brotherhood supporters who are becoming increasingly radicalised.

After Morsi was removed from power, the Brotherhood marshalled its supporters and countered with large protests and sit-ins of its own. For weeks it took over the area surrounding the Rabaa al Adawiya Mosque in Cairo. The mood in the sit-ins grew increasingly radicalised, with supporters of the former president vowing to take up arms. The military operation that cleared the sit-in was brutal and retrograde, with many civilians caught in the crossfire. By the time they were ultimately cleared, hundreds were dead, including the children of leading Muslim Brotherhood figures.<sup>5</sup>

In retaliation, Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Cairo and other governorates, particularly in southern Egypt, burned police headquarters and targeting Coptic Christian churches and establishments, fuelling sectarian tensions further. The hope that the Brotherhood would be humbled and moderate after its removal was dashed. Many of its supporters are now vowing terrorist attacks as revenge and have given up on the electoral process. According to one young Brother:

Many of the youth now say, no more ballot boxes. We used to believe in the caliphate. The international community said we should go with ballot boxes, so we followed that path. But then they flip the ballot boxes on us. So forget it. If ballot boxes don't bring righteousness, we will all go back to demanding the caliphate.<sup>6</sup>

Brotherhood supporters recently made good on their threats of violence. Extremists recently targeted the convoy of Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim, a man and a ministry they hold responsible for the recent crackdown against them. Ibrahim survived the assassination attempt but 22 others were injured.<sup>7</sup> Bombings are a rare occurrence in Egypt, even at the height of extremist Islamist activity in the 1990s. This portends a troubling violent future for Egypt, one that could be defined by an ongoing battle against an Islamist insurgency.

A similar backlash against Islamists and deepening fissures between pro- and anti-Islamist camps is evident in Tunisia. As in Egypt, an Islamist opposition party, Ennahda, came into power on the heels of the protests. It was considered more moderate than the Brotherhood and more willing to work



with secular opposition groups, but its rise to power was nevertheless unnerving to many secular Tunisians. Particularly troublesome was Ennahda's inability or unwillingness to reign in more radical salafist groups that grew emboldened in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Ire against Islamists grew when salafists were found responsible for the assassination of two liberal Tunisian politicians.

Under the previous Ben Ali government, preachers and mosques were strictly controlled. The government approved every prayer leader and vetted topics for Friday sermons. After the revolution, salafist groups seized control of hundreds of mosques. Although the current government has claimed it regained control of many of them, it's still battling salafist groups and hasn't been able to control their sometimes violent actions or thwart their extremist agenda.

In rural towns across Tunisia, demonstrations by salafist groups have descended into violent brawls. In the town that began the Arab Awakening, Sidi Bouzeid, a group of salafists ransacked the sole hotel that sold alcohol.<sup>8</sup>

Salafist clerics in Tunisia continue to promote ultraconservative goals, such as immediately putting Islamic law into effect, the veiling of women (particularly the full niqab), outlawing alcohol, shunning the West and joining the *jihadi* forces in Syria. Although they participated in elections, 'Democracy, they insist, is not compatible with Islam.'<sup>9</sup>

Salafist groups were also responsible for setting off the worst crisis in Tunisia's post-revolutionary period with the assassination of human rights activist and opposition politician Choukri Belaid, who was shot outside his home in February 2013. His death set off a wave of protests against the government, which many believed was kowtowing to hardline groups, and brought the resignation of the prime minister. Months later, another liberal politician, parliamentarian Mohamed Brahmi, was shot by gunmen in the same manner as Belaid outside his home. Authorities pointed to the ultra salafist group Ansar al Sharia as responsible for the killings, but many Tunisians believe that Ennahda and Tunisian security forces conspired with the group in the killings.

Inspired by Egypt's Tamarod campaign, Tunisians also initiated their own signature campaign against the government. The Tunisian Tamarod campaign is conducting ongoing demonstrations in front of the Constitutional Assembly. They are demanding the removal of the current government, the dissolving the current National Constituent Assembly and the forming a new consensual government, as well as a more thorough investigation of the assassinations of Belaid and Brahmi. Some are also calling for the removal of President Moncef Marzouki.

Tamarod campaigns have also taken hold in Bahrain, Libya, Morocco and Palestine. In Palestine and Morocco they're also calling for the removal of Islamist authorities. While they don't want a military takeover as happened in Egypt, they're agitating in the same way against what they see as undue and corrupt Islamist influence in their countries.

In Turkey, often heralded as an example of moderate and effective Islamist governance, there have been protests and agitation against Erdogan's rule. In July 2013, small sit-ins protested against a planned urban development for Istanbul's Ghezi Park. The brutal break-up of the protests through arrests and tear gas turned the sit-ins into riots, and the protests expanded into Occupy-like camps in Istanbul and other major cities across Turkey. They came to encompass broader anti-government concerns, such as freedom of the press and assembly. The protesters eventually ended their sit-ins, but Erdogan's reputation and popularity took a severe hit and anti-government protesters were emboldened against his rule.

Erdogan's influence has also been affected regionally. He was a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and hoped it would follow the model of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, or AKP). The Turkish president has also aspired to regional leadership, and a close relationship with Egypt was key to regional influence. But after the Muslim Brotherhood's ouster, Erdogan is out of step across the region. Erdogan agitated against the coup, calling what happened in Egypt a conspiracy of the US and Israel. By doing so he alienated Egypt's new leaders and their allies, Saudi Arabia and others.

Erdogan's response to the Taksim protests also diminished his star in the Arab world after he was once hailed for supporting the protests of the Arab Spring. Once feted across Arab capitals, Erdogan is now criticised for doing the same thing by forcefully shutting down dissent. The Turkish Islamist governance model is not looking so appealing across the Arab world.

While it may seem like Islamists' fortunes are on the wane, they're a force that has a long and deep history in the Middle East. Just because the Brotherhood is currently out of power in Egypt and there's growing dissatisfaction with Ennahda in Tunisia and the AKP in Turkey does not necessarily mean a return to a liberal political environment. This isn't the end of political Islam; rather, it will be a political Islam that's more prone to violence, less willing to participate in elections and less able to exert organisational discipline. It will be one that's even less willing to work with liberal and secular forces, portending a continuous divide across the region.

## Sectarianism's grip

Given Islam's dominance over the region, it's often forgotten that the Middle East is incredibly diverse, with different ethnic groups, minority sects and Christian denominations that have deep historical roots. But, as Islamist groups dominated politics in the post-revolutionary period (whether the Sunni Arab Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Shia political parties in Iraq), minority groups and pluralistic traditions have been threatened.

The political rule of Islamist groups isn't the only factor contributing to growing sectarianism. Sectarianism has been building since before the Arab Awakening, but the collapse of authoritarian rule and the chaos of the post-revolutionary period have allowed sectarian identity politics to thrive and grow. The sectarian divisions range from the civil war raging in Syria, to the Shia uprising in Bahrain against a minority Sunni monarchy, to the struggles of Christian minorities in Iraq and Egypt, to the ever-widening regional divide between Sunni and Shia majority states. Sectarian identity is now more than ever becoming the defining feature of the new politics and culture in the Middle East.

There are three drivers of sectarianism in the Middle East today. The first is the growing stricture of Sunni Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia, in addition to the rule of the AKP in Turkey, which has been touted as an example of Islamist democracy. Viable Sunni Islamist political parties, supported by wealthy Sunni Gulf monarchies, particularly Qatar, are presenting a challenge to previous Shia ascendancy.

For many years, Shia Iran could claim to be the only Islamist government in the region, but the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the US occupation of Iraq brought another major state within the Shia orbit. Lebanese Hezbollah grew in strength, winning nationwide elections and effectively operating a parallel government in its area of control. The Iranian and Hezbollah-backed Shia Alawite Assad regime in Syria completed the Shia crescent.



But the emergence of Sunni Islamist governments in the post-revolutionary period began to tilt the balance back to the Sunni camp. Wealthy Gulf states stepped in with monetary assistance in the transition period. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are large funders of Sunni Islamist groups in Egypt.<sup>10</sup> Qatar in particular supported Morsi and now it and Saudi Arabia are throwing their support behind Egypt's generals—who, while not officially Islamist, are nevertheless a bulwark against Shia Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have also funded numerous *salafi* parties around the region, amplifying the salafists' political power disproportionately to their support within their own countries. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have also provided millions in funding and arms to anti-Assad rebels in Syria, particularly the hardline *jihadi* elements, such as the Al-Nusra Front.

The second driver of sectarianism in the new Middle East is the Syrian civil war. A Sunni-led insurgency is battling a minority Shia Alawite government, with the rest of the country's Christians, Shia and Druze twisting in the tornado kicked up by both sides. The Syrian civil war has not only welded sectarian identities in Syria, but also become a proxy sectarian conflict for the entire region.

According to a recent analysis by Geneive Abo:

Each new turn in Syria, whether facts on the ground or merely perceptions of new threats and new alignments that may emerge, reverberates throughout the Levant and the Persian Gulf. In this way, the Syrian war has provided a mechanism for amplifying traditional sectarian conflict, effectively elevating it to a transnational affair. The Sunni in Lebanon believe that by confronting Hizballah they are fighting for all Sunni, especially their persecuted co-religionists in Syria who are being slaughtered at the hands of President Bashar al-Asad's Alawite-dominated regime. Likewise, the Shi'a in Bahrain believe their uprising is for the benefit of all Shi'a in the region, particularly their long-oppressed brethren across the border in Saudi Arabia. In Lebanon and the Persian Gulf, sectarianism has become so pronounced that Sunni clerics now warn of the 'Shiitization' of the Middle East and exploit the brutality committed by Asad's regime to spur calls for outright Sunni ascendancy.<sup>11</sup>

Hezbollah's involvement has added a new dimension to the Syrian conflict, entrenching sectarian divides further. The group was once admired by both Shia and Sunni groups for its organisational and military prowess, but its entry into the Syrian conflict on the side of the Assad regime has steeled the determination of the Sunni insurgents. It's also given additional fodder to the jihadists among them to frame this as more of a sectarian battle than a fight to oust a brutal dictatorship. Sunni and Shia from neighbouring countries are entering Syria, with fighters from Iraq, Lebanon, the Gulf states and even Egypt crossing the border to join the fight on their respective sides.

The Syrian civil war has also incited Sunni-Shia battles in other countries. There was a marked increase in violent sectarian attacks in Iraq in 2012. Shia militias are resurgent, attacking Sunni gatherings, and Sunni jihadist groups are attacking majority Shia areas, echoing the fierce sectarian violence of 2006 and 2007. The US troop surge in 2007 helped stem the violence at that time, and the Shia, confident in their control of the government and security forces, stopped responding in tit-for-tat attacks. That's now no longer the case. Sunni insurgents, who never quite gave up their fight against the Shia-led government, are ramping up their attacks and Shia militias and rogue government security forces are once again responding.<sup>12</sup>

The sectarian creep of the Syrian civil war is most evident in Lebanon, where there have been reciprocal car bombings targeting Shia and Sunni mosques and neighbourhoods. A car bomb attack in Tripoli in late August 2013 killed 24 and injured hundreds—the worst instance of sectarian violence in years. The Alawite community in Lebanon as well as long-time Assad ally, Hezbollah, support the Assad regime in Syria, while Lebanon's Sunni leaders have thrown their support behind the Syrian rebel fighters. Both Shia and Sunni Lebanese religious leaders have ties to their corresponding sides in Syria and are supporting the fighting through arms, men and logistics support.<sup>13</sup>

Lebanon has a long history of sectarianism and fought a brutal 15 year long civil war along sectarian lines. It doesn't take much to disrupt the precarious balance of its many sects, and the Syrian civil war has now tipped it over. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees are crossing over into Lebanon, increasing tensions in the way Palestinian refugees did decades ago. Syrian rebels and the Assad government are using Beirut as a staging base and administrative and logistics centre, marshalling Lebanese supporters to their cause. As Lebanon becomes more involved with the Syrian sides, its fragile sectarian quilt is becoming unravelled once again.

The third driver of sectarianism in the post-revolutionary period is the sweeping aside of pluralistic traditions in favour of Islamist or sectarian identities. Minority groups, who were the main guardians of the pluralist tradition, are either fleeing or are being squeezed out of their countries as sectarian tensions and Islamist identities take hold.

Coptic Christians are leaving Egypt in record numbers; an estimated 90,000–100,000 Copts left in the early months after Mubarak's ouster.<sup>14</sup> Violent attacks against Copts have increased since the revolution, even though Coptic Christians actively participated in the revolutionary protests along with their Muslim compatriots. There was hope in the post-Mubarak period that a new spirit of citizenship would expand opportunities for all Egyptians, but the election of the Muslim Brotherhood and the boldness of *salafi* groups have threatened the safety and livelihood of many Copts and have made them feel that there's little space for them in the new Egypt. In fact, *salafi* groups openly advocate that Copts should be relegated to second class citizens protected as *dhimmi* under Islamic law. But it isn't only Islamist groups that have targeted the minority Christian community; the state has also been responsible for violence against them.

Attacks against Copts began soon after the revolution with the 'Maspero Massacre'. The military opened fire on peaceful Coptic protesters by the Maspero building in downtown Cairo, killing 28, and then used state television to exhort Egyptian citizens to come down and fight with the military against the Copts. Since then, the Coptic cathedral has been attacked, and police were caught on camera aiding the attackers. Hundreds more small-scale attacks against Copts, their properties and businesses have occurred.

After the military coup ousted the former President Mohamed Morsi, his Muslim Brotherhood supporters retaliated by going after Coptic establishments. Churches and monasteries were looted and burned. Coptic homes, youth centres and even one orphanage were attacked, leaving people injured or dead. Coptic activists recorded the destruction of 38 churches and additional attacks against 23 others. The Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters used Copts as scapegoats, and the authorities either chose or could do little to stop the attacks.<sup>15</sup>

It's not only in Egypt that minorities are being squeezed. In Lebanon, Libya, Iraq and Syria, Christian and other minorities are facing attacks and their numbers are dwindling as many seek asylum. Iraq's Christian population has fallen from 1.4 million in 1987 to 500,000 today. In Syria, Christians,

who made up an influential minority, are suffocated by the civil war, fearing both the Assad regime and what might come if he goes. Syrian Christians have also been fleeing in record numbers, joining the hundreds of thousands of refugees. Entire Christian villages like Deir al-Zour and Hasakah in northeastern Syria have emptied as lawlessness and attacks against them by extremist rebel groups have risen. Though some Christians have opposed the Assad regime, they're still targeted by al-Qaeda linked groups and are kidnapped for ransom and forced conversions. Some Christians have complained that their participation in the rebel movement was not welcome. 'We are not with the regime. [But] many times the Islamists didn't want us to join them in the demonstrations. We tried to participate but we were not given a role. It felt as though it was a strategy to force Christians out of the revolution.'<sup>16</sup> Other Syrian Christians have chosen neutrality and have refused to join sides, but that leaves them vulnerable and unprotected on all fronts.

## Whither the West

All this has become a huge challenge not only for the people of the Middle East but for the rest of the world, particularly the West. The international community hasn't figured out how to best engage the region and how to assist in its transition while first doing no harm. This sentiment is perhaps most clearly embodied in the Syrian civil war—a clear humanitarian disaster claiming 100,000 lives and displacing millions more. With the war flaring into a regional sectarian battle and no clear 'good guys' to support, the West, particularly the US, is at a loss as to how and how far to engage in the conflict. After two years of resisting pressure to intervene, the Obama administration has publicly stated that the United States is providing arms to the rebels in Syria (albeit in a limited capacity) and is preparing for further military strikes, after concluding that the Assad regime used chemical weapons against insurgents—a 'red line' drawn by Washington, if the Russian US agreement on the dismantling of the Syrian chemical weapons program does not hold.

After a tense few weeks of 'will he or won't he' conduct a military strike on Syria, the Obama administration was temporarily saved from having to act on the threat by a surprise Russian proposal, acquiesced to by Syria, that the Assad regime give up his chemical weapons program to international monitoring and eventual destruction. The 'Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons', was reached after a marathon session of negotiations in Geneva on 14 September. The agreement calls for the entire arsenal of chemical weapons to be removed or destroyed by mid-2014. If the Syria government does not comply, the matter will be referred to the UN Security Council where violations would be taken up under Chapter VII.

However, even though a framework agreement has been reached, it is still not at all clear that the diplomatic negotiations will hold. There are major differences emerging in the draft UN resolution to formalise the deal. Russia continues to resist parts of the draft resolution that discuss the threat of force should Syria not comply with the conditions of the agreement. They are also objecting to language formally condemning Syria for chemical weapons use and the issue of whether to refer officials suspected of chemical weapons use to the International Criminal Court. There are also differences of interpretations regarding Chapter VII language in the agreement. Russian officials interpret it to mean that Chapter VII is only one option that would be considered at a later date, with any use of force requiring a separate resolution. The United States, France and Britain want the current draft resolution to state that the threat of Chapter VII would be conferred immediately.

The threat of a military strike remains very real. Both the United States and France have publically stated they reserve the right to conduct unilateral military action against the Assad regime,

irrespective of a UN resolution, should they not comply with the Framework Agreement. But a limited military strike may do little to degrade the Assad's regime capacity. It may also embolden the regime to go further in its response against the rebel fighters and civilians, even conducting more chemical weapons attacks. Military strikes may also inadvertently harm civilians—a reality that jihadist fighters and the Assad regime can manipulate. A strike could also increase the ranks of internationally and externally displaced Syrians.

Ironically, assisting the rebel fighters will also lead to an outcome that the US can't fully support. The Syrian opposition is now dominated by jihadist and extremist elements that will dominate and jeopardise Syria's other sects. The alternative to Assad is not appealing or in the West's interests.<sup>17</sup>

Support for the rebels remains tepid and, at this stage, it isn't clear that the additional arms shipments or military strikes will help resolve the Syrian conflict in a manner that is good for regional stability and Western interests. The arms shipments will be limited in scope and to particular rebel groups. There's also the risk that arms sent to moderate rebel groups will fall into the hands of the more effective jihadist fighters, such as the Al-Nusra Front and al Ahrar al Sham. The US has encouraged Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Jordan to provide arms and training, but much of that assistance, particularly by the Gulf monarchies, has been directed towards jihadist groups who are no friends of the West.

Despite the Obama administration's assurances that any military strike will be targeted and limited in nature, one cannot discount the risk that the US will be sucked into a protracted campaign when initial military strikes prove limited in their effectiveness—a reality that will complicate an already knotty conflict. The Syrian conflict is no longer a rebellion against a brutal regime. It has transformed into a battle between Syria's various sects over control of the country. It's also a jihadist front line as well as a proxy regional conflict for influence between Iran, the Gulf states and Turkey. Assad's allies, Iran and Hezbollah, will be compelled to step up their support. Military strikes on Syria will not just be about punishing the Assad regime for its brutality but will factor in this complex melange of interests.<sup>18</sup>

The Obama administration has stated that it's not interested in precipitating regime change through a military strike but in sending a message that chemical weapons use is unacceptable. It must back up its 'red line' threat in order to deter other hostile actors, such as Iran and North Korea, in the future. The US–Russian agreement on the inspection and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile does not address any resolution to the Syrian civil war nor the creep of the Syrian civil war to its neighbours—countries like Turkey and Iraq where the US has clear geopolitical strategic interests. The results of action and inaction are both unappealing. The cliché that the United States has no good options regarding Syria is all too true.

Additionally, US influence is limited not only by a paucity of suitable partners in the rebel movement but also because of its own actions. Allies in the region have described the US position on Syria as 'feckless.' The tepid US support is in contrast to Iran's strong support for the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia and Jordan have cut the US out of a rebel training program because of what they see as a lack of US commitment. At the same time, the United Arab Emirates refused to host a defence officials meeting in the absence of what it believes to be strong US leadership.<sup>19</sup>

The US's lack of leadership and clear strategy on the Syrian issue is clearly fraying its relations with those allied Middle Eastern governments that remain. At the same time, it can't count on the support of traditional allies like the UK, whose parliament ruled out British military action in Syria. Australia,

too, is unwilling to commit to a substantial military role in Syria. Coordinated international action in Syria is proving impossible as other influential international actors such as Russia, China and Iran assert themselves in the region and in international forums. The US may also be forced to initiate a military intervention illegally, without United Nations approval, as any resolution will surely be vetoed by Russia or China.

Syria's a microcosm of what now faces the US in the Middle East. Washington has no clear options and few allies to work with. It's struggling to come to terms with a new Middle East and shape its policies towards the region accordingly. The revolutions swept away a number of authoritarian regimes that had anchored the Middle East in a relatively stable, if stagnant, configuration that governed the region for decades. With many of those relationships gone, the US is struggling to build new ones and find new ways to secure its interests. It's also finding it difficult to enlist the support of its traditional allies in Europe and Asia to respond to a troubled region.

The US is less able to influence outcomes in the Middle East today for a number of reasons. First, the dynamics of the Arab revolutions were completely outside the US's and any other country's purview. They were authentic indigenous uprisings with no international support. With the exception of Libya, there was no international intervention, and thus little international influence, in the change of governments.

Even though the US was deeply engaged in the region for the past decade and fighting a two-front war in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was blindsided by the revolutions of the Arab Awakening. Perhaps it didn't see the signs because of its deep involvement in the so-called global war on terror. The US also believed that its main interests lay in successfully completing the Iraq and Afghan engagements. If it did so, the thinking went, its nation-building efforts in those two countries, coupled with other counterterrorism efforts, would end the threat from jihadists and propel political reform in the region. The Bush administration hoped it could transform Iraq into 'a beacon on a hill', a shining example of democracy and good governance after Saddam for the rest of the Middle East to follow. That didn't happen as planned and the US's reputation suffered.

Furthermore, the dominant actors that have emerged in the post-revolutionary period are untested partners and they're wary of the West and vice versa. Part of reason that the US in particular maintained its imperfect relationship with the region's dictators, such as Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt and Saleh in Yemen, was precisely because it was fearful that promoting reform and democratisation more vigorously would install Islamist parties with large question marks over their commitment to democracy and human rights and their willingness to engage with the international community. Now it's precisely those parties that have emerged out of the political chaos into governance, and all are uncertain how to proceed.

The West is not quite sure how to engage with the new governments that have emerged or assist in brokering through the political and constitutional stalemates that have emerged in places like Egypt and Tunisia.

Though Egypt has returned to rule by military generals, the old partners of the US, Washington has a deep ambivalence over how they came to power. The new officers in charge of the Egyptian military are equally ambivalent about the US, because they perceive that US officials were unsupportive of their military takeover. There's a great deal of uncertainty over how to proceed, how to use military aid as leverage and whether a return to military rule is in the best interests of the US-Egypt

relationship. American leverage and credibility have taken a strong hit in Egypt. There's a virulent anti-Americanism on display in Egypt not seen since the days of Nasser.

Second, there's also little desire on the part of the American public and the Obama administration to engage in the Middle East. The administration has taken a conscious decision to decrease its interventions in the region. The interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan didn't go according to plan. Both endeavours were sold to the American people as easy interventions when they were anything but. It isn't clear that the US accomplished the goals it set out in those military campaigns. Both countries have become more complicated, violent and corrupt and have fallen further outside the US sphere of influence.

The American public and the American policy community have taken important lessons from these experiences and have developed an isolationist streak. The public doesn't understand why it had to send its sons and daughters out to die in the desert when the region resents them and American interests aren't even being realised. The focus in the US at the moment is decidedly domestic. The loudest applause during President Obama's second inaugural address came when he said he'd close the door on a decade defined by two wars in the Middle East.

Syria is complicating this strategy, however. President Obama is now compelled to bring the US into another Middle East conflict. Having issued a threat that the US would take action if the norms against using chemical weapons were violated, he must now do so if the diplomatic agreement does not hold in order to protect his own administration's and the country's credibility. Many in Congress, including many members of his own party, are expressing deep reservations about approving a military strike against Syria. His congressional supporters are facing deep pressure from their constituents to go against a strike.<sup>20</sup>

Third, new and growing oil and gas production in the US is propelling America towards a long-held goal of energy independence. Reliance on foreign sources of energy, particularly in the Middle East, has often been the driver of the US's military and political extension in the region. Since the 1956 Suez crisis, the US has been the pre-eminent political, military and economic international player.

But in 2012, only 40% of oil consumed in the US was imported—the lowest proportion since 1991.<sup>21</sup> While the US will continue to play a critical security role in the region for many years to come, new extraction techniques in the form of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling have unlocked a hydrocarbons resource previously unavailable in the US. That, combined with a move towards the use of lighter crude oils and alternative energy sources and increases in energy efficiency, has raised the likelihood that over time dependence on Middle Eastern oil will drop.<sup>22</sup>

Domestic politics in Middle Eastern countries is also playing a greater role in foreign policy, which used to be dictated by regional proxy contests and the influence of global players. Now, as politics in the Middle East is being driven more by elections, domestic interests are driving foreign policy, in much the same way as they have in the West for decades. On many matters, such as the platform of Islamist parties, the nature of internal domestic reforms and counterterrorism tactics, the US has been out of step with Arab opinion for many years and has lost its cache among the elites. It's just as unable to affect domestic Arab opinion.<sup>23</sup>

So where does this leave us? The Middle East is now arguably more unstable than under the dictatorships and authoritarian governments that were overthrown. The initial hope that the spontaneous people-powered protests would bring about lasting democratic change, slowly but



surely, has waned. Instead, a Pandora's box of problems has been opened. The Middle East was always a mélange of complications but is now even more so. It's going through a period of profound uncertainty and chaos. The appetite of the international community, particularly the West, to engage is slim, and it's uncertain how to do so even if the West wants to.

## Australia's role

Like the rest of the West, Australia's role in influencing events is limited. To be fair, Australia never exerted a great deal of leverage in the region to begin with, but as a crucial allied partner of the US, it often hitched its wagon to America's endeavours and fate in the region. It seems that with America's and the West's declining influence comes a corresponding decline of Australia's.

However, Australia is currently uniquely positioned to exert more influence than it normally would through its role on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), particularly when it comes to the Syrian crisis and dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions. Australia has a UNSC seat for the next year and a half, and it must decide what it wants to do with that short time. Action from this divided council is slow going. Russia and China often block attempts at international intervention, no matter how worthy. The Syrian conflict is a case in point.

The Foreign Ministry has been active in advocating for a political solution to the Syrian crisis but, like the rest of the international community, has been stymied by Russia. Working up a plan for a UN resolution to the Syrian conflict won't be easy, and it's unclear how much an impact Australia or other international actors will have, given Russia's intransigence. Moscow's still smarting from Libya, where the UN-mandated intervention (backed by Russia at the time) went from humanitarian intervention to regime change.<sup>24</sup>

Without gaining Russia's support, it will be difficult for Australia to move forward many of its proposals to assist Syria and shore up regional stability. Even minimalist intervention is being opposed. Russia and China are currently blocking an Australian proposal for a 'medical pact' in which medical personnel and medical facilities would be protected and quarantined from the conflict.<sup>25</sup> Despite the difficulties, Australia must continue to advocate for what's right on the humanitarian level.

Australia should, as a leader in the Security Council and on humanitarian principle do what it can to assist this desperate humanitarian situation and bolster the norm against chemical weapons use through robust diplomacy to shepherd through a UN resolution and inspection's regime that would ensure the destruction of Syria's chemical stockpile.

It's important that Australia do so, as a reflection of Australian values, but also because Australia's actions and involvements on the international stage in relation to Syria will also have an impact at home.

Scores of Australians have travelled to Syria, some to help out on the humanitarian side, but others to join the rebel fighters. The Australian Federal Police estimates that more than a hundred have gone over to fight with jihadist groups in Syria and is concerned that they can return to Australia, battle-hardened and potentially continuing their jihad in Australian cities.<sup>26</sup>

The sectarian conflicts in Syria are also being played out in Australia's major cities. Rival supporters of the Assad regime and the rebellion are threatening one another in Sydney and Melbourne. Syrian

community leaders in Sydney claim that Australian-based supporters of the al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Nusra Front are driving much of this.<sup>27</sup>

Australia's now in a position where it must use its unique position on the Security Council to continue to advocate for a solution but be wary that with that increased involvement come increased risks on the international stage and at home. The more Australia involves itself in the Syrian conflict, the more potential jihadists may find to disagree with, and blame and threaten Australia.

Nevertheless, Australia is right to focus on humanitarian assistance and to push political negotiations. Despite the risks that come with further involvement, Australia should continue to advocate as an honest broker. The current tack that Australia is taking to shore up its humanitarian support is a correct one. So far, Australia has provided \$78 million in humanitarian support for refugees and pledged \$12 million more in aid for UNICEF and the Red Cross to help neighbouring countries host refugees under the previous government.<sup>28</sup>

Australia also has a role to play in the matter of chemical weapons inspections and the effort to combat weapons proliferation. The most compelling rationale behind a military strike is the protection of international norms against chemical weapons proliferation. Even though Australia isn't prepared to defend those norms with military assistance, it does have a long history in the effort to stem chemical weapons proliferation. Australia was a leader in establishing the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997, and also formerly led UNSCOM.

There's residual capacity in Australia to assist in chemical weapons inspections, and Canberra should offer those services to the UN as it investigates Syria further. It can rhetorically, politically and practically support this effort at the UN and on the international stage as the Syrian conflict ratchets up.

Former Foreign Minister Bob Carr has been a steady advocate of the rights of minorities in the Middle East and has repeatedly called attention to the perils they face in this transition period.<sup>29</sup> The Coalition too has taken the issue of minorities in the Middle East to heart. It's important that Australia continue to bring attention to minority rights in the region, both because it's a reflection of Australian values and because repairing pluralism in the Middle East is a means to stability in the region.

It can do this by repeatedly bringing the issue to the attention of the region's leaders and raising it in international forums. In working on a solution to the Syrian conflict, pluralism and minority rights must factor into a conversation that all too often involves a toss-up between supporting a majority Sunni insurgency or a minority Alawite government.

It's also useful for countries like Australia to frame the issues in the Middle East beyond sectarian terms. Deep-seated structural governance problems are facing the region and are affecting people of all sects. While one certainly can't and shouldn't ignore the sectarian dimension, it's worth noting on a regular basis and on the international stage that the region can move beyond sectarianism and majoritarianism as it tackles its issues and that the problems facing the Middle East are structural and a matter of governance, rather than solely sectarian divisions.

Along with Australia's UNSC seat came chairmanship of the UN Sanctions Committee responsible for monitoring international compliance with sanctions regimes against al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Iran and reporting any violations. Dealing with Iran's nuclear program, which it claims is for peaceful purposes but which many believe to be for weapons, is a key issue in determining the balance of

power in the Middle East and will affect the three trends outlined in this paper. However, Australia's ability to affect this issue via the Security Council is more limited than its ability to affect the others.

In theory, the Sanctions Committee should give Australia a platform to contribute effectively to caulking the sanctions regimes and influence outcomes on the Iranian nuclear question. In fact, the chairmanship of this committee isn't as influential as it sounds.

While detailing the effectiveness of sanctions is beyond the scope of this analysis, many academic and policy assessments of the Iran sanctions regime, particularly UN sanctions, have been mixed at best. Most have found that the monitoring of violations has lacked effectiveness and that violators have rarely been punished. Member states also lack the political will to increase their effectiveness, particularly China and Russia, which only reluctantly agreed to the current round of UN sanctions against Iran. Over the years, both countries have become increasingly hostile to the use of sanctions. While the UN's actions on Iran are more cohesive than its actions on Syria, a fractious Security Council has reduced the effectiveness of a number of UN sanctions.<sup>30</sup> It isn't clear that Australia's chairmanship will change this situation.

However, by having a UNSC seat, Australia has distinguished itself from its previous position in the region as merely an 'ally of the US'. It now has a distinct and different way to exert influence, advocate for international action in the region and push countries in transition towards meaningful reform.

The UNSC position has its limitations. Chinese and Russian opposition to almost any kind of international intervention has handicapped the Security Council, so gaining any resolutions or agreements will be laborious. Australia's position as head of a sanctions committee is a thankless task, but its tenure on the UNSC has coincided with a unique moment in the Middle East—one it can influence to secure Australia's global and regional interests as well as contribute to the path to stability in a still troubled region.

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