

“Something wicked this way comes”:¹ background to the new extremist challenge in the Middle East and North Africa: case studies

By George Joffé

Table of contents

The Israel-Palestinian crisis	2
The Arab transitions	4
The future of the Arab Spring in North Africa	5
Attitudes in the Gulf and Egypt	5
The situation in Syria, Iraq and Yemen	7
The extremist threat	10
Extremism in Syria and Iraq	10
Extremism in the Sahara and the Sahel	11
The outlook	11
References	12

■ Executive summary

In a previous NOREF report (*“Something Wicked This Way Comes”: Background to the New Extremist Challenge in the Middle East and North Africa*), the background to recent events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was analysed. The report suggested that, firstly, geopolitical and energy issues meant that Western states could not avoid engagement with the region and that, secondly, past Western engagement had left a legacy that had severely degraded the West’s relations with it. It went on to suggest that one consequence of this had been that the emergence of extremist groups in the region had far more to do with this estrangement between the MENA region and the West than with issues of doctrinal or ideological commitment. The report also suggested that there were quite specific regional issues that reflected these concerns and further explained why there appeared to have been such a radical reordering of priorities in the past 18 months. Among the issues it identified were the ongoing crisis in relations between Israel and the Palestinians; the aftermaths of the “Arab Spring” of 2011; the crises that emerged as a result in Libya, Syria and Yemen; and the growth of extremism throughout the region, as typified by the Islamic State. This report seeks to unpack these issues and demonstrate how they contribute towards the generalised regional crisis through which the MENA region is passing at present by examining particular cases.

There is an organic link between the events of 2011 and the situation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) today in that the crises that the region currently faces are a consequence of both the events that occurred then and of the longer-term crises that the region continues to face

that themselves contributed to those events. Perhaps the most significant of these, even if it has tended to be submerged by more current problems, is the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians. For almost 70 years Israel has refused to recognise the reality of Palestinian

¹ “By the pricking of my thumbs,/Something wicked this way comes” (*Macbeth*, Act 4, scene 1, ll. 44-45).

dispossession or the need to come to terms with regional realities that have arisen from the fact of that dispossession. In addition, the Arab states of the Gulf refuse to acknowledge that autocracy, however much it might be gilded with financial concessions to citizens, can offer no long-term antidote to demands for political participation and liberalisation. And the West is not prepared to recognise its responsibility for the immense and growing antagonism that regional populations feel towards its past role of interference in regional affairs. It is an appreciation of this factor, perhaps, more than any other, that can help us understand the current crises that the region faces today, although the other factors mentioned above also play an essential role. These issues are reviewed below in the order in which they appear in an earlier publication on this issue.² At the top of the list, although it might not be conventionally considered to be the most acute issue that the region faces, is the dispute between Palestine and Israel. Yet in reality it has continued to fuel all the remaining crises that dominate the region, even if it is not at the forefront of regional concerns.

The Israel-Palestinian crisis

There can be little doubt that the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian problem, at least in the form that was proposed by the “Quartet”³ at its inception in April 2002, is dead. The concept of two sovereign states, one Israeli and the other Palestinian, coexisting side by side had driven the Middle East peace process forward from its advent in the Oslo Accord of September 1993. The principles on which it was based harked even further back, to United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967, passed at the end of the Six-Day War that occurred in June of that year. The actual plan to achieve a lasting peace between the Palestinians and Israel – the Quartet’s “Road Map” – was formulated by the U.S. in 2002 and introduced a year later in mid-2003, just after U.S. military operations in Iraq were ostensibly completed. It had sought an end to the violence engendered by the outbreak of the Second Intifada in late September 2000; an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories to the positions it had occupied in 2000; an end to Israeli settlement building; the reform of Palestinian institutions; the recognition of Israel’s right to exist; the construction of a sovereign Palestinian state; and a final settlement of all outstanding issues by 2005. Unlike previous initiatives, it was to be a “performance-based and goal-driven road map” to a permanent peace, articulated in three phases: the creation of preconditions for a Palestinian state; the creation of such a state with provisional borders; and final status negotiations to resolve all outstanding issues and to confirm the dimensions and nature of this state (IPS, 2003).

In the event, the initiative never advanced beyond the first phase of the proposed road map, largely because Israel was not prepared to accept the implications of the settlement freeze it required, laying down instead 14 additional and prior measures that would have to be accepted by the Palestinians before it could go ahead. In reality, too, events overtook the Quartet; Yasir Arafat’s death in 2004, Ariel Sharon’s unilateral plan for the Israeli evacuation of the Gaza Strip in 2005, his subsequent stroke at the beginning of 2006 and replacement as premier by Benjamin Netanyahu, and the Palestinian elections that brought Hamas into a dominant position in Palestinian politics in the same year. This in turn generated the violent clashes between Hamas and Fatah the following year and the consequent Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip by the new Netanyahu-led government, which has subsequently been supported by Egypt, except for a brief interlude between 2012 and 2013 when the Muslim Brotherhood was in power in Cairo. The blockade has been punctuated by repeated clashes between Hamas and Israeli forces, most notably in 2008-09 and 2014, with considerable losses of Palestinian civilian life on each occasion.

The real failure of the two-state solution, however, arises from the immense reluctance of the Netanyahu government to embrace its implications and the yawning gap between the endorsement of the principle of peace with the Palestinians and the acceptance of the practical consequences of such a principle by Israeli public opinion. Despite the Israeli premier’s formal endorsement of a Palestinian state in a speech at Bar-Ilan University in June 2009, in which he also made it clear that such a state could not have armed forces, while also eschewing any Israeli desire to expand its settlements on the West Bank, his subsequent record suggests that the reverse was actually the case.

Over the past six years of the Obama presidency in the U.S. the Netanyahu government has repeatedly thwarted U.S. attempts to promote a negotiated solution to the issue of the occupied territories. Quite apart from the attacks on Hamas in Gaza, which have cost thousands of Palestinian lives, Israeli behaviour on the West Bank has repeatedly undermined the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, by posing unrealistic demands and by progressively annexing more territory, both to block U.S. peace initiatives and to punish the Palestinians under occupation, while turning a blind eye to the provocative behaviour of the settlers there. The implications of this policy and proposals for alternative approaches have been published by NOREF (see Dajani & Husseini, 2014).

In part, the responsibility for this policy reflected the nature of the coalition that made up the Israeli government under Netanyahu, which was resolutely right wing, not just

² “*Something Wicked This Way Comes*”: Background to the New Extremist Challenge in the Middle East and North Africa. NOREF Report.

³ The Quartet consists of the U.S., the UN, the European Union and Russia. Its purpose is to facilitate a solution of the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip based on the creation of two sovereign states. It is assisted by the Quartet representative for Palestinian economic affairs, Tony Blair.

because of the premier's reliance on the religious parties that oppose all concessions to Palestinians, but also because of the growth of a new right-wing tendency in Israeli politics that takes a similar view of the Palestinians. Secular politicians such as Yair Lapid of Yesh Afid or Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu only reluctantly endorse a two-state solution, blame the Palestinians for the failure of negotiations, and reject arguments laying the blame for regional instability on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Religious leaders, such as Naftali Bennett, who now heads Jewish Home – the successor to the National Religious Party – want to hand Gaza over to Egypt and annex the West Bank, leaving the Palestinian Authority only in charge of security areas A and B (27% of the total area of the West Bank or about 6% of historical Palestine), yet with Israeli sovereignty over the totality of the region.⁴

Netanyahu had called an election, which took place in mid-March 2015, because he had tired of pressure by the left wing of his coalition, led by Tzipi Livni, for progress in negotiations with the Palestinians under occupation. In the event, he pulled off a spectacular electoral victory against the odds, with his Likud party winning 30 seats rather than the 20 predicted, largely because of the scare tactics – about the Palestinian and Iranian threats to Israeli security – that he deployed in the final days of electioneering. He might not enjoy the easy success in his renewed mandate that he had anticipated when he called the election, however, for two powerful blocs opposed to him emerged during the campaign and, although they failed to win, they have brought together powerful resentments regarding the policies he will be forced to espouse because of the coalition he will now have to build, given Israel's extreme proportional representation system.

The first such bloc, which coalesced last December, brings together the Israeli Labour Party under Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni's Ha Tnuah in what has been called the Zionist Centre movement. It had been expected to garner more Knesset seats than Netanyahu's Likud, although the complexities of coalition building in Israel do not mean that it would therefore automatically take over the government. Nor would it make much difference to the marginalisation of the Palestinian Authority that Netanyahu has so successfully achieved – Livni was, after all, Netanyahu's negotiator with the Palestinians until last December when he dropped her, citing her "disloyalty" to his government as the reason. Nor is either party in the coalition powerful enough to force through new policies for seeking genuine peace with the Palestinians. The other grouping is a recent combination of the formerly fractious Arab parties, forced to join together because of new laws designed to exclude

minor parties from the Knesset and to reinforce the Jewish character of the Israeli state (see Shikaki, 2014). If the new coalition holds together – and particularly if it can bring itself to collaborate with the Israeli left – it could act as a spoiler, blocking further political excesses against Palestinian interests that any new Israeli government seems likely to endorse, given public scepticism about the peace process.

The new Israeli premier's problems will be compounded by the coalition he will be forced to form. Israel's right-wing parties – Jewish Home, Yisrael Beiteinu, Yesh Afid and Shas – will be his obvious partners. However, although he would be happy to pander to their preferences and prejudices, including the restoration of privileges for the Orthodox that were removed recently and an indefinite delay on renewed negotiations with the Palestinians, they cannot give him the magical 61 seats he needs to dominate the Knesset. For that he will need a new partner, the centrist Kulanu, led by Moshe Kahlon, who seeks to be finance minister. Although Kulanu has indicated that it would join a coalition, Kahlon is most unlikely to endorse the restoration of financial privileges to the Orthodox or renewed delays over negotiations with the Palestinians because of the elevated defence costs that would be involved. The result is that many commentators believe that such a coalition will only enjoy a relatively short life before new elections have to be called and the left can have its revenge.

Nonetheless, the combination of the premier's own distaste for a genuine two-state solution, the parallel pressures of his right-wing coalition government and widespread Israeli scepticism over the viability of negotiations with the Palestinians⁵ means that it will continue to be very easy for the Israeli government to ignore Western pressure for renewed negotiations. This, allied to almost universal support for Israel in the U.S. Congress, has also allowed the government to defy the Obama administration as well. Its intransigence, however, has alarmed some of its more moderate members, not least because of the premier's determination to force through legislation to confirm the Jewish character of the Israeli state – which would effectively disenfranchise the Arab Israeli population.

Netanyahu, however, faces two further problems as a result of his recent strategy and tactics. Firstly, he has alienated Europeans and has offended the Obama administration and, secondly, he has relieved the Palestinians of any need for restraint. Sweden has actually recognised the Palestinian state and the parliaments of Britain, France, Ireland, Portugal and Denmark have called on their governments to do the same, as did the European parliament. The European Commission, meanwhile, at the

4 Yair Lapid was originally a television journalist who only entered politics in 2012, but became finance minister; Naftali Bennett started a political career in 2011 after having been chief of staff to Binyamin Netanyahu and is economic minister; Avigdor Lieberman founded Yisrael Beiteinu in 1999 and has been foreign minister since 2009. Their political positions indicate their importance to the coalition government and, therefore, their influence on policy. See Bennett (2014); Meo (2013); *Haaretz* (2014); Ravid (2014).

5 In 2012, while 69% of Israelis supported the principle of peace and a two-state solution, only 29% thought it possible for there to be a successfully negotiated peace agreement (BICOM, 2013).

behest of all the European Union's member states, has drawn up a list of sanctions to be applied to Israel if it continues to encourage settlement expansion in the West Bank. There is little doubt that these actions have earned the tacit approval of the Obama administration, still smarting from its repeated humiliations by Netanyahu.

The latest of such humiliations – Netanyahu's March 2015 speech to Congress at the invitation of the Republican majority, but against the wishes of the White House, which was not even consulted – breaks a long tradition of Israeli policy of preserving a bipartisan approach to the U.S. The Obama administration would dearly like to teach Netanyahu a lesson in diplomatic civilities, but is still constrained by domestic public opinion and Congressional hostility, although how much longer its patience will hold is not clear: the president expressed his scepticism over the Israeli premier's willingness to achieve a negotiated two-state solution in the aftermath of the Israeli elections. In any case, Netanyahu's speech did little to improve his stature, since it was devoted to decrying the Obama administration's policy towards Iran in a vain attempt to undermine the negotiating process between the P5+1 group and Iran over the latter's nuclear ambitions. He has, as a result, lost credibility in both the U.S. and Israel and had even been expected to lose the Israeli election as well, given the unpopularity of his domestic policies, although it is highly unlikely that this would materially affect Israeli policy towards the peace process, for the reasons given above.

Obama's chance may soon come, however, for the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, has finally given up on his recalcitrant Israeli counterpart, who endlessly complains that he has nobody to negotiate peace with as he blocks every initiative and opportunity to do so. The Palestinian leader has finally accepted that he too has no counterpart for negotiation and has instead sought international recognition. Although the U.S. has blocked the recognition of Palestine as a state through the UN Security Council, the incipient state has been able to join a plethora of international bodies, including the International Criminal Court (ICC) – which means that Israel may be increasingly embarrassed by charges for offences under international law against Palestinian citizens, against which the U.S. can offer no protection, because it is not itself a subscriber to the ICC's statutes.

Netanyahu professes to shrug off the significance of this move and has sought to punish the Palestinian Authority by withholding taxes the Israeli state collects on its behalf on Palestinian exports. However, he is aware of how embarrassing this could prove to be, because other states who subscribe to the ICC are obliged to arrest those accused of offences before it and to deliver them to the court for judgment. Alongside this development is another initiative, the Boycott, Divest, Sanction movement, which is gathering pace, even in the U.S., and will contribute significantly to tainting Israel's image in the wider world. Indeed, even if

Netanyahu is forced from office, the current constellation of political attitudes in Israel will prevent any meaningful change in the country's approach to the Palestinians under occupation and will deter the Palestinians from moving forward on their plans for international recognition. The one bright spark on Netanyahu's horizon appears to be the discomfort faced by Hamas in the wider Arab world (see below), but this is attenuated by the knowledge that a further confrontation in Gaza is all but inevitable, with all the attendant adverse international consequences.

The real problem for Netanyahu – and, indeed, for the wider political establishment in Israel – is that he and they now have no meaningful policy options except a continuation of past policies. Even though he won the election and might now wish to innovate – which appears not to be the case – he will not be able to do so because of his future coalition partners (on the right and hostile to a Palestinian state) and because of the profoundly sceptical nature of Israeli public opinion about a viable peace. The same constraint of public opinion would hamper any alternative coalition government from altering the basic policy Netanyahu has effectively institutionalised, and it is for this reason that the apparently inevitable coalition with Kulanu will spell instability for the government he will construct and its relatively rapid demise.

This means that he will be left only with the policy of demanding ever more concessions from the Palestinians on the West Bank, if he agrees to new negotiations – and Mahmoud Abbas knows he has no further concessions to give – and preparing for the inevitable renewed confrontation with an admittedly weakened Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip. In effect, since Israel will not be able to tolerate an independent or autonomous Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip within the 1967 Green Line boundaries and since preponderant public opinion in Israel demands a Jewish state, thus disenfranchising Israel's Arab population, the most likely outcome will be a single state in which the majority of the population is also disenfranchised, or the Bantustan alternative of isolated, partially empowered Palestinian enclaves under Israeli sovereign control. Both outcomes will eventually be fatal for the Zionist vision of what Israel should be and, given the demographic pressures of more rapid Palestinian population growth, will increasingly call the survival of a Jewish state in the Middle East into question, quite apart from ensuring that the issue of Israel's relationships with the Palestinians and the wider Arab world will continue to feed (and worsen) regional instability, despite the recent covert links with the Gulf states over shared anxieties over Iran.

The Arab transitions

It is currently fashionable to decry the mass movements in the Arab world of four years ago as a failure through which autocracy has reproduced itself or chaos has penetrated the region.

The future of the Arab Spring in North Africa

Superficially, this is a position that is very difficult to deny; after all, only in Tunisia is there an unambivalent democratic transition actually in being, after a new constitution and parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014. Yet even here there has been a rise in instability and violence, with Salafi extremism in Tunisia's major cities and Salafi jihad violence along its borders with Algeria. In addition, the Nida Tounes-dominated victors in the parliamentary and presidential elections have decided to exclude Islamists from any role in formal power, thus threatening to recreate similar divisions to those that exist in Egypt, unless Ennahda is prepared to demonstrate its forbearance in moving into opposition, despite being the second-largest party in the National Assembly.

The outlook for Tunisia is, although hopeful, still clouded and, quite apart from the political and security situation, its economic circumstances and continuing high levels of unemployment are considerable causes of concern. In social terms, too, Tunisian youth are increasingly disaffected from the political process, yet have nothing to offer as a generally acceptable alternative. Against this, however, is an increasingly vibrant artistic and media environment that is beginning to entrench a new political culture that, in turn, will help to guarantee the permanence of the country's democratic transition. The same seems to be true of the much more restricted political liberalisation in Morocco, where an Islamist movement, the Parti de Justice et du Développement, is the major component in a coalition government and provides the prime minister, but where the Royal Palace still stands outside the formal political system and effectively dominates it. Once again, the dire economic situation – a result both of the European economic crisis and the relative lack of success of economic development to create sufficient employment – coupled with the growing royal lack of interest in political evolution towards a more liberalised system could severely hamper the advances that have been made.

Algeria, having successfully stemmed popular anger over the economic drivers (food and oil prices in 2010) of the Arab Spring and having begun its own uncertain transition three decades ago with the Berber Spring in 1980, but still riven by its memories of the civil war in the 1990s, has seen little change. Instead it is trapped in a time warp recalling the political principles of an earlier era, with a severely physically and intellectually disabled president and the political stasis that attends prolonged succession processes. The process is complicated by the opacity of the Algerian political system, dependent as it is on occult power elites in the army and security services. As a result, its "façade democracy" (the term is Algerian) exists in a kind of meta-stable suspension made possible only by its ample financial reserves, while the youth feel increasingly isolated and repelled by a system that can offer them no inclusion. The one arena, however, in which Algeria's government has shown a degree of activism is over reining in its public expenditure in view of the collapse in oil prices

at the end of 2014, for it fears that its reserves of around \$190 billion will otherwise soon be exhausted.

Libya, on the other hand, lurches from one crisis to the next as the Qaddafi regime's failure to bequeath to it a viable bureaucratic infrastructure denies it security, let alone political stability. The lack of effective central institutions has led both to the fragmentation of the state and to the subordination of the political process to the vicissitudes of a plethora of militias and the interplay of political and religious extremism. Around the country, with its two governments in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania (the first recognised by the international community and the second bolstered by Islamist moderates and Qatari and Turkish support), a hinterland of growing chaos, insecurity and violence is spreading through the Sahara and Sahel. Western short-sightedness in tolerating regime change under the guise of its "responsibility to protect" the country's civilian population and then abandoning it to its own devices once the Qaddafi regime had been overthrown bears a considerable responsibility, together with indigenous mutual political intolerance and the mobilisation of tribal identities, for the country's plight. Despite UN attempts to mediate a reconciliation between the two sides, the outlook for a unified state looks grim and the spectres of civil war, a failed state or a federal solution seem very close. Meanwhile the chaos in North Africa is driving massive and intensifying illegal migration into Europe, as much from North Africa itself as from Africa south of the Sahara (Joffé, 2015a).

Attitudes in the Gulf and Egypt

Attitudes in the Gulf have significantly hardened over the past four years. In the wake of Saudi Arabia's decision, backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to support the Sunni minority government in Bahrain against the Shia protest movement there in early 2011, the Gulf has emerged as a strong opponent of the objectives of the Arab Spring. Although Oman has taken a neutral stand and Kuwait has been very restrained in its opposition to these events, Saudi Arabia, backed by the UAE and Bahrain, has taken a resolute stand against the events themselves, against the Assad regime in Syria and against Qatar, while remaining hostile to the Shia-dominated government in Iraq. Two unifying themes have permeated this approach: the Gulf attempt to build a wider coalition of conservative states to resist popular demands for liberalisation and an open hostility towards Islamist movements previously generally considered moderate, but which now threaten to become involved in government, primarily the Muslim Brotherhood. Allied to this has been a concerted attempt through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to isolate Qatar because of its sympathies for moderate Islamist movements and force it into line with its neighbours in the Gulf.

The one superficially aberrant feature of this policy has been the attitude adopted towards the Assad regime with which, before 2011, the Gulf states had been on reasonably good terms. This seems to have a consequence of

Damascus's brusque and arrogant response to Gulf attempts to mediate a solution to the crisis that erupted in March 2011 through demonstrations in Dera'a and elsewhere to which the Assad regime reacted with open repression. The same has been true of Turkey's newfound hostility towards the Assad regime, an attitude amplified by Ankara's growing anxieties over Kurdish extremism in Syria creating "blowback" inside Turkey itself. The result has been the growing irrelevance of the Gulf states and Turkey to the future of Syria, despite their proximity to it, and a worsening estrangement between them and the West – principally Europe and the U.S. – as Western policy increasingly deviates from the ideal they have sought.

During the past year Saudi Arabia has made desultory moves on at least two occasions to persuade monarchies outside the Gulf – Morocco and Jordan – to join an expanded GCC, thereby forming an alliance of conservative states to resist the radical initiatives to restructure the Arab world in the wake of the upheavals of early 2011. Both monarchies quietly resisted the proffered Saudi embrace, while Oman made it clear that it wished to have nothing to do with such an initiative, so the idea was stillborn. Another Saudi initiative to force Qatar into line with its Gulf neighbours was more successful, however, after a three-month diplomatic embargo, with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrawing their ambassadors in March 2014, ostensibly because Qatar had interfered in their domestic affairs. Relations were only restored the following October after Qatar had agreed to rein in the Al Jazeera satellite channel and discourage moderate Islamist leaders from attacking its neighbours. In mid-November Qatar also restored diplomatic relations with Egypt, after Al Jazeera had closed down its *Misr Mubashir* programme, which Egypt considered to be hostile to the al-Sisi regime in Cairo. Although Kuwait and Oman stood aloof from these moves, it was clear that Doha felt unable to resist the pressure emanating from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

The pressure on Qatar had been presaged by a growing campaign orchestrated by Egypt and the Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, throughout 2014 to demonise the Muslim Brotherhood in the wake of its ejection from power in Egypt at the end of July the previous year. Egyptian hostility was, no doubt, a consequence of the military-backed regime's determination to eliminate all potential competitors for power by delegitimising and marginalising the Brotherhood while linking it with the Sinai-based extremist Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. Cairo's change in attitude also made it possible for the new military regime to isolate Hamas in the Gaza Strip by aligning it with both the Brotherhood and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis as being responsible for violence in Egypt in the wake of the coup, a change in attitude that certainly eased U.S. and Israeli acceptance of the changes in Cairo. In the Gulf, the UAE has long been antagonistic to the Brotherhood and, by extension, to Doha's espousal of it. Saudi Arabia, however, had previously been a protector of the Brotherhood, harbouring Egyptian Islamist intellectu-

als in the 1960s. Its hostility today appears to be based on its determination to both resist political change in the Middle East and to challenge any competitor to the religiously based political system it has itself introduced or to its preferred Salafi/Wahhabi religious vision. The speed with which the Gulf endorsed the military coup in Egypt in 2013, with grants-in-aid of up to \$12 billion and promises of a further \$10 billion in 2015, was a notable consequence of the Saudi change of heart.

Two consequences have flowed from this realignment. The first is that Egypt is now firmly lodged within a constellation of conservative Arab states in which it has lost agency as a regional power to Saudi Arabia. Indeed, it is now an open secret that the Gulf states covertly exchange security information with Israel, for in the current regional climate they share a common interest over regional security which is so acute that formal arrangements are, perhaps, not necessary. Israel and Egypt have also improved their collaboration over common security issues and it could be argued that the diplomatic engagement between the two engendered by their peace treaty in 1979 and then guaranteed by the U.S. has been revived, albeit with a weaker guarantor in the form of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners, against which either state can apply pressure. This is a situation that is likely to persist, given Egypt's financial weakness and the hard line it has taken against political Islam – President al-Sisi was recently calling for a reformation within Islam, by which he seems to have meant the subordination of religion to the state and its domestication primarily within the private sphere. Yet his regime increasingly represents the return of the *feloul*, i.e. of the autocracy that the Tahrir revolution was intended to eliminate, and, as such, is further entrenching the political divide throughout Egyptian society, which now means that large parts of the country – from Sinai to the Sa'id – are suffering from a worsening security crisis to which the army reacts with brute force.

The second is that Gulf attention to the sectarian divide that was so typical of attitudes there in 2012 and 2013 seems to have been replaced by a determination to eliminate religious competition to Salafi Wahhabism in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although Iran is still seen as a geopolitical threat and an hegemonic challenge in the Gulf, the urgency that previously acute concerns about the Sunni-Shia divide seems to have abated. Indeed, a third recent development in the region appears to offer indirect confirmation that this has occurred.

This has been the spectacular decline in global oil prices in the second half of 2014 to below \$40 per barrel – 60% of the figure in the previous June. Saudi Arabia has made it clear that it is primarily interested in market share rather than maintaining global oil prices and, given its foreign exchange reserves of around \$749 billion in November 2014 (SAMA, 2014: Table 9), this is a choice that it can afford to make. The question is why it has chosen this approach: it clearly adversely affects Iran and Russia, two

states with which it has serious disagreements, the first over geopolitics and Syria and the second over its policy towards the Assad regime. Neither, however, appears to have been its real target; instead it is the U.S. and the issue of unconventional oil resources that appears to have stimulated Saudi ire, for the U.S.'s rapid transformation into the world's largest oil producer and a potential net exporter threatens the market hegemony of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Unconventional oil becomes unviable at prices below \$58 per barrel, while Saudi production costs are far below this level – hence Saudi Arabia's concern to maintain market share for, even if returns are reduced, they will still be positive whereas, for the U.S., the reverse will be true. And, as far as Iran is concerned, Hashemi Rafsanjani, a tacit supporter of President Rohani of Iran and still an immensely influential figure, has suggested that the time has come for a replay of the Saudi-Iranian agreement of 1998 over OPEC that saw Crown Prince 'Abd Allah – as he was then – visit Tehran. Now Tehran proposes a return visit with the same objective – surely an indication that Gulf anxieties about the arc of Shia extremism have subsided, at least to some degree.

In Jordan, too, the relatively liberal political system that emerged from the Arab Spring is vitiated by a continuing economic crisis and royal lack of interest in further political liberalisation, both factors being compounded by the country's serious external challenges, trapped as it is between Gulf intransigence and the appalling violence in Syria and Iraq. It, like Lebanon, is bearing the brunt of the Syrian refugee crisis with remarkably little help from the international community. In Lebanon, the Syrian crisis has sharpened the sectarian divides throughout the country and, through Hizbullah's engagement in the civil war in Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime, is slowly threatening to reintegrate Lebanon into the political sphere of "Greater Syria". There are growing fears that these developments will be internalised in a recrudescence of some variant of the civil war of the 1970s and 1980s or that conflict with Israel will explode once again, threatening domestic stability alongside the refugee crisis it now experiences.

The situation in Syria, Iraq and Yemen

Two developments characterise the situation in Syria: the slow reversal of fortunes in favour of the Assad regime and the marginalisation of all moderate opposition groups to that regime, whether Islamist or secular. With help from Iran and Hizbullah in Lebanon, together with more covert support from Shia groups in Iraq, the Syrian army has been able over the past year to begin to claw back control over the central spine of Syria – the main road linking Damascus to Homs and Aleppo. This is being done at immense cost to the 22 million-strong Syrian population: according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, by January 2015, 206,000 Syrians had died since the beginning of the civil war there and around 1 million have been wounded (Gladstone & Ghannem, 2015). There are also

3 million Syrian refugees in surrounding countries and a further 6.5 million Syrians are internally displaced – almost half the total population (UNHCR, 2015).

Quite apart from this appalling human cost, there has been a strategic cost as well – one that the Syrian government seems willing to bear. This is that vast tracts of Syrian territory are being alienated from its control. One-third of the country is estimated to be under the control of extremist groups, mainly in the north around Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, where the Islamic State (IS) holds sway, with an enclave in the south along the Golan Heights and next door to Israel under the control of the Nusrah Front. Strangely enough, the Israeli government appears unconcerned about its new neighbours, being more worried about its older enemy in Lebanon, Hizbullah. Along the borders with Iraq and Turkey, Syria's Kurds are busy carving out a new autonomous Kurdish region and confronting IS. Then there is the question of the future status of Turkey's substantial Kurdish population and, in a more remote future, the issue of Iranian Kurdistan as well.

Kurdish success in Syria, incidentally, raises questions about Kurdish ambitions for national independence or, at the very least, autonomy, in both Syria and Iraq. There have already been suggestions from Irbil that the time has come to consider unity between the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish autonomous regions and ambitions for independence remain strong, particularly after Iraq's Kurds have effectively annexed the Kirkuk region and have similar ambitions towards the area around Mosul, once IS has been expelled. There are, however, two major problems and several minor ones with this scenario. Firstly, Iran is completely unwilling to consider any change in the status of its Kurdish population, not least because of the implications this might have for its other minority communities, among which native Farsi nationals form a bare majority. Secondly, Turkey is extremely suspicious of the dominant political movement among Syria's Kurds, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD), which it sees as an extension of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanî (PKK), considered to be a terrorist movement in Turkey. It is therefore not prepared to endorse a separate Kurdish entity under PYD control in Syria. On the other hand, Turkey has acted in recent years as patron to Iraq's Kurds, effectively guaranteeing the Kurdish Autonomous Region's status against pressure for further integration from Baghdad.

It would, therefore, have an interest in extending its control over Syria's Kurds if the knotty problem of the PYD could be resolved, even if they were politically integrated with Iraqi Kurdistan. The real problem, therefore, is Turkey's relations with the PKK, and this is currently under discussion as the Erdogan regime negotiates a comprehensive and permanent deal with Abdallah Ocalan, the imprisoned PKK leader who has been held in isolation in a prison on the Sea of Marmara since 1999. If a new and acceptable status for Turkey's Kurds can be achieved, then Turkish suspicions towards Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and Syria

might dissipate. It is extremely unlikely, however, that Turkey would embrace the idea of Kurdish independence, because of the implications that this would have for its own territorial integrity – and the Kurds will not be strong enough in the foreseeable future to demand it.

A major reason for the dramatic growth in extremist control has been the reluctance of the Syrian regime to actually confront the groups concerned, apparently because their success feeds its own narrative that the real cause of the civil war has been the growth in Islamist extremism, not its own repressive brutality. This is, of course, not the only reason, for the fragmentation of the Free Syrian Army, in theory supported by the U.S. and Europe, and of moderate Islamist groups supported by the Gulf and Turkey, has allowed the extremists to dominate the resistance arena. And, behind this has been the unwillingness of Western powers to actually provide the military muscle that the moderate opposition would have needed, particularly after the Syrian chemical weapons programme was disbanded in 2013, partly because the opposition, both civil and military, has proved to be so fragmented over the past three years. Now, of course, the military campaign being waged by the U.S. and its 60-member coalition against IS in both Syria and Iraq has taken precedence, with the bizarre consequence that the West – the sternest critic of the Assad regime – is tacitly seeking the same outcomes as the regime that it condemns. And the essential mediators of this new implicit relationship will be Russia and Iran, two states with which the West is otherwise at odds over Ukraine and Iran's nuclear ambitions, respectively.

Indeed, it has been the extension IS into Iraq that has occasioned the greatest international alarm. This began in January 2014, although the group itself originates in Iraq, because its immediate precursor had been al-Qa'ida in Iraq during the previous decade at the start of the century. The movement has been able to capitalise on the resentments of the Sunni minority community there, particularly as a consequence of the particularism shown by the al-Maliki government, which deliberately marginalised and victimised them. A combination of government insensitivity and army brutality at the end of 2013 transformed a local demonstration in Ramadi into a province-wide tribal and popular protest throughout Anbar Province. The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), as it then was, seized the opportunity, with its local allies, to exploit the situation and was soon entrenched in Ramadi and Falluja, the two main cities in the province, while the government discovered the consequences of having transformed, for reasons of sectarian political control, the new Iraqi army into a corrupt sectarian force with little real military capacity.

Soon the conflict in Anbar spilled over into sectarian suicide attacks in Baghdad and surrounding cities by sleeper cells long positioned there by Sunni extremists and the former Ba'ath resistance, now concentrated in the Jaysh Rijal Tariqa Naqashbandi, a resistance movement

derived from the former Ba'ath Party and the Naqashbandi Order. By mid-year, ISIS, as the core of the newly awakened Sunni resistance, expanded its reach into the predominantly Sunni provinces in northern Iraq and, in a lightning move, seized control of Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, while the Iraqi army there crumbled before the onslaught, which had pitted a guerrilla force variously estimated at 1,500-3,000 men against Iraqi army units between 30,000 and 40,000 strong. ISIS forces then moved southwards towards Baghdad, but were eventually thrown on the defensive by a combination of Kurdish *peshmerga* forces and Shia militias, backed up by units of the Iraqi army. In September, at the beginning of Ramadan, IS was proclaimed in Mosul as a caliphate, becoming the nemesis of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, which had laid out the outlines of what were to become the states of the Middle East (see Joffé, 2015b).

ISIS's success was also to prove to be the nemesis of the al-Maliki government, for Iraq's international partners combined with his domestic opponents to force the prime minister from office, to be replaced by a more moderate Shia figure prepared to try to rebuild Sunni confidence in the post-invasion Iraqi political system. At the same time the gratuitous brutality of IS, with its publicised beheadings of hostages and its overt challenge to the formal geopolitical order of the Middle East, persuaded the U.S. to organise an extensive air campaign against it in both Syria and Iraq that has severely hindered its potential to extend the territories under its control. Once again, as in Syria, the short-sightedness of Western policy has produced another contradictory result, for Iran has actively engaged in supporting both the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurds, thus making it into an objective ally of its greatest opponent – the U.S. And in fact, although there is no concerted planning, the two countries are now in contact over their individual operations against IS, a development that Iran will undoubtedly – and probably correctly – assume gives it increased leverage in the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 group, where a framework agreement is due by the end of March.

Yemen has become the poor sister of the crises in Iraq and Syria, yet it has the potential to profoundly destabilise the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, Yemen's crisis is a product of three separate but intersecting crises that all pre-date the Arab Spring, but have been intermingled with it because of the way in which demonstrations in 2011 in Change Square in Sana'a targeted the 34-year-long regime of Ali Abdullah Salih, the nexus of the three crises. The problems that Yemen faces arise from, firstly, the Al-Houthi rebellion; secondly, the Hiraq (Southern secession) movement; and, thirdly, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and in one way or another all of them relate to policies long followed by the Salih regime. These policies were devoted to reinforcing the regime against Saudi and tribal challenges, whatever the implications for North Yemen and, later, Yemen itself. Initially, its major opposition came from the al-Islah movement, derived from the Hashad tribal

federation, itself backed by Saudi Arabia. This, however, has changed during the last decade.

The Al-Houthi rebellion began as a Zaidi⁶ political movement in 1992, calling itself Ansar Allah, but was transformed into an anti-government rebellion in 2004, largely because of its opposition to the Salih regime's policies of engagement in the U.S. "war on terror". Since then, despite a series of broken ceasefires, six attempts by the government to suppress it and one war with Saudi Arabia, the movement has continued to enjoy widespread Zaidi support, especially from its support base in Sa'ida Province north of Sana'a. In late 2014 it occupied the capital and at the start of 2015 took over the presidential palace, forcing both the president and the government to resign. It has also moved south, challenging AQAP in its tribal redoubts, and seems set to impose a new government on the country that will be more sympathetic to Zaidi sentiment. It has even been said to have been in contact with Ali Abdullah Salih himself as he seeks to regain power by whatever means might be available. Saudi Arabia asserts that the movement has been funded by Iran, which now seems to be the case, although for many years this was not so, and the GCC, which had considered letting Yemen join it, is becoming increasingly alarmed about the regional implications of the situation in Yemen.

The HIRAK movement is really part of the fallout of the end of the cold war in 1989. One consequence was a Soviet decision to end its subsidies to the People's Republic of South Yemen, which had been established at the end of 1967 as the sole Marxist state in the Middle East. This loss of support, coupled with a bloody settling of accounts within the leadership of the country's sole political party, the Yemeni Socialist Party, forced the South Yemeni government to accept the option of reconciliation and reunification with North Yemen, by then already under the control of the Salih regime, to create the current state in 1990. The reunification turned out to be a disaster in which Southern political leaders felt profoundly marginalised, so in 1994 they tried to secede from the union. The resulting six-month-long civil war enforced the union and the dissident leadership fled into exile. Southern resentments, however, have not abated and in recent years have been increasingly overtly expressed. In 2007 these protests were organised into demonstrations by the HIRAK movement, a coalition of a series of Southern protest groups with differing agendas, united only by a desire to rebalance the North-South divide in Yemen in favour of the South. As the Al-Houthi movement has extended its control, so HIRAK has begun to entrench itself in Aden and the Hadramouth and now refuses to recognise the authority of the Sana'a government.

AQAP in Yemen is a consequence of two quite separate developments. The first was the attempt by the Salih regime to bolster its support base by allowing radical Islamic groups in the Middle East to find a refuge there. Such groups were also mobilised during the Yemeni civil war in 1994 to aid the Yemeni army in its victory over dissidents in the South. It was only after the USS *Cole* was attacked by al-Qa'ida in Aden harbour in October 2000 that the regime, reluctantly and under U.S. pressure, turned against such groups. The second development was the expulsion of al-Qa'ida from Saudi Arabia at the end of the last decade after a sustained but ultimately unsuccessful campaign there against the Saudi state. The remnants of the group gathered in South Yemen and coalesced with other groups to form AQAP in 2009. The group has benefitted from its protection by some of the local tribes to confront the Yemeni government and army and has also transmuted into Ansar al-Shari'a (Yemen), developing a policy of engagement with local populations to found an Islamic state, as occurred in Sinjibar in 2011, rather than simply maintaining its original aims of combating the "near" and "far" enemies of an Islamic order.⁷ The movement now also confronts the Al-Houthi movement as it moves southwards, but is also threatened by a U.S. drone-assassination campaign against its leadership since 2012.

The Yemeni government, therefore, is confronted with a far more complex threat than is the case elsewhere in the Middle East and one, moreover, with roots buried in the pre-2011 era rather than in the events of 2011. It is a threat that is compounded by Yemen's resource scarcity, partly human-made and partly the result of the country's extremely poor resource endowment, apart from some oil and gas, the exploitation of which is constantly interrupted by tribal attack on production facilities in attempts to gain concessions from the government. Yemeni agriculture has been virtually destroyed by the cultivation of *qat*, which occupies 40% of all available agricultural land and demands water that could otherwise be used for food production. And in Yemen's harsh mountainous environment both water and land are in very short supply.

In short, the Change Square demonstrations coincided with these far older problems in creating an intolerable situation for the regime. Nonetheless, the regime did manage to hold on to power until December 2011, despite provoking a civil war centred on the capital, Sana'a. It was only when a GCC-brokered ceasefire and mediation plan intervened that the then-president was persuaded to step down and go into temporary exile in the U.S. He was replaced by Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who has attempted unsuccessfully over the last three years to mediate with the Al-Houthi movement and the HIRAK while confronting AQAP against

⁶ The Zaidi are a Shia movement derived from the fifth Shia imam, Yahia bin Za'id, the son of Za'id bin Ali, the third son of the caliph, Ali, alongside Hassan and Husain. Za'idi beliefs are close to those of the rationalist Mutazilites and the legal system (*fiqh*) parallels the Hanafi *mandhab*.

⁷ The terminology comes from Muhammad Faraj, who defined the "near enemies" as autocratic and morally deviant regimes (at least as far as the Islamic ideal was concerned) in the Arab world, while the "far enemies" were those regimes outside the region (such as the U.S. and European Union) that supported them. Both, therefore, would be legitimate objects of jihad – his sixth but neglected obligation as a matter of faith on all Muslims. The distinction recalls Ayatollah Khomeini's distinction between the greater and lesser Satans. See Faraj (2000).

a background of tribal unrest and discontent. It is his government that the Al-Houthi movement now threatens to unseat.

The extremist threat

Perhaps the most surprising development over the past year has been the apparently sudden eruption of Salafi jihadi extremism throughout the MENA region. In reality, of course, it has been present there for far longer, although it lacked the prominence that it has now achieved. It is also conventionally associated with the aftermath of the Arab Spring, although, even though the two phenomena might be coincident with each other, extremism is in many respects a quite separate phenomenon. Nonetheless it has become an acute issue, eclipsing other concerns, such as the Gulf states' obsessions with Iran and the "Shia arc of extremism" or their concern over the moderate political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood. There are three arenas where the phenomenon has emerged: in Syria and Iraq; in Yemen, as described above; and in the Sahara and Sahel.

Extremism in Syria and Iraq

Extremism here has emerged in a particularly virulent form in an environment created by the civil war in Syria and the failure of governance in Iraq. However, the phenomenon itself long pre-dates the Syrian crisis, for it began as a result of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Its roots lie in the remnants of the Ba'ath Party after its precipitate dissolution in the immediate aftermath of the invasion and in the marginalisation of the leadership provided by the previously dominant Sunni community. The rebellion against the U.S. presence in the country took on various forms, combining tribal discontent – particularly after the Shia-dominated government marginalised the Sahwa movement, which had helped to end the sectarian war in Baghdad in 2007 – with the political resentment of cashiered former Iraqi army personnel and the dissolved political leadership – now codified through the Naqashbandi Order – together with extremist Islamist elements that coalesced around al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI). Although the founder and leader of AQI, Abdulmusab al-Zarqawi, was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006 and the movement itself was effectively dismembered in 2009 and 2010, it has been able to revive through the Syrian civil war.

Its revival was effectively due to the survival of a significant Syrian component within AQI that had sheltered from the U.S. onslaught in Syria and was revived in 2012 as the Nusra Front, specifically to seize the initiative against the Assad regime away from the Free Syrian Army and moderate Islamic groups formally supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The Iraqi leadership claimed hegemony over the movement in Syria during 2013, although the Nusra Front leadership demurred, asserting its allegiance to al-Qa'ida instead. Nonetheless, the revived AQI, now renamed ISIS, returned to its Iraqi roots and infiltrated the

predominantly Sunni community in Iraq's Anbar Province, as well as setting up sleeper cells in Baghdad and the predominantly Sunni towns to its north. In January 2014, exploiting a dispute between the Sunni leadership in Ramadi and the Shia al-Maliki government, ISIS became a major component of armed Sunni resistance in Anbar, moving into the north of the country and capturing Mosul in June of that year before turning south to threaten Baiji, Tikrit and Baghdad.⁸

In Mosul in September 2014, as Ramadan began, the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, proclaimed himself caliph and announced that the territories ISIS – now renamed "The Islamic State" – controlled in Iraq and Syria would form the core of a new Islamic caliphate designed to overthrow the post-colonial order in the region based on the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. Apart from its military success, due in large part to the alliances it had made with former Ba'athists, the Naqashbandi order and local Sunni tribes, the new movement was distinguished by its impressive competence with social media and the internet and by its quite extraordinary exemplary violence and brutality, both being used to undermine its opponents. It was also highly successful in capturing the attention of alienated and frustrated youth in both the Middle East and North Africa, as well as further afield in Europe and even in the U.S. and Australasia. By the end of January 2015 it was estimated to have attracted up to 30,000 "foreign fighters" to its banner, not just because of their religious fervour, but primarily because of a range of other, more secular factors that even included the "romance" of jihad (see Chafiq, 2015; Tozy, 2008). Extreme brutality also characterised its administration of the territories it controlled, although it did also provide a rudimentary administrative infrastructure.

In late 2014 the brutality it displayed towards captives and hostages, together with the threat it posed to Iraq, forced a U.S.-led intervention, involving a 60-member coalition, although its Turkish and Arab support base was ambivalent. As far as Turkey was concerned, the ambivalence seems to have revolved around the confrontation that had emerged between IS and Kurdish forces in both Iraq and Syria, where the Turkish authorities found themselves confronted with the possibility that opposing IS would mean embracing Kurdish groups such as the PKK and PYD, which they regard as terrorist organisations and a threat to Turkey itself. For the Gulf states, the ambivalence reflected a tension between the objectives and the methods employed by IS, the brutality of the latter being condemned while the former at one level reflected the legitimacy of the state as understood, at least in Saudi Arabia.

The campaign against IS, moreover, was based solely on air power, because Western states were loathe to re-engage on the ground, as were regional states apart from Syria, Iraq and the Kurds. However effective the air

⁸ Cockburn (2015) contains the most up-to-date account of ISIS/IS.

campaign might prove to be, military engagement on the ground will eventually be necessary and it seems likely that those engaged in the air campaign will eventually have to rethink their priorities. Indeed, President Obama's request to Congress in February 2015 for authorisation of military action against IS seems to be a precursor to intervention on the ground in some form. Yet there is evidence that even the intervention from the air, damaging though it may have been to IS, has made its agenda even more palatable to large numbers of disaffected Muslims in the MENA region because of their anger with Western policy. The irony is, in short, that IS is as much a product of past Western intervention as it is of doctrinal extremism, so it is difficult to see how a new intervention can conquer the essence of the organisation's appeal, even if it will result in its own physical destruction.

Extremism in the Sahara and the Sahel

Extremism in the Sahara and the Sahel stems from two sources – the crisis in Algeria in the 1990s, which was resolved by a bloody civil war, and the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya in late 2011. In the aftermath of the Algerian civil war, which ended in 1997-98, the remnants of the extremist groups opposed to the Algerian government concentrated in Kabylia and, in 2003, linked into the smuggling networks of the Sahara. After the spectacular kidnapping of 33 European tourists, who were eventually ransomed for a rumoured €5 million, this new Saharan extension of the Algerian groups retreated to the old salt-mine complex of Taoudenni in remote northern Mali, where it enjoyed the protection of the local tribes. There the group remained, occasionally threatening surrounding states or kidnapping isolated tourists for ransom while slowly expanding its numbers through recruits from Mali itself and Mauritania. In September 2006 it declared its rhetorical allegiance to al-Qa'ida, as al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), but remained focused on its original and primary target, Algeria.

The dismemberment of the Qaddafi regime in 2011 forced its Touareg mercenaries to return to Mali, where in 2012 they declared an independent Touareg homeland, Azawad. AQIM, by now expanded by the addition of a Touareg Islamist movement, Ansar ed-Din, and a breakaway Mauritanian-Sahelian faction, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), piggy-backed on the Touareg initiative to take over the major towns in northern Mali, including Timbuktu, and to subject them to a rigid Salafi regime. In January 2013, as a dissident faction of AQIM launched an attack from Libya on the In Amenas gas facility in eastern Algeria, the combination of AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar ed-Din launched an assault on the remainder of Mali, seeking to capture the capital, Bamako. The initiative failed when French and Chadian troops intervened, seeking to eliminate the extremist groups in their north Malian redoubt. Since then the groups have been marginalised but not eliminated, and surrounding states, led by Algeria, have been beefing up their counterterrorism capacities. Algeria has, furthermore, attempted to mediate in the separate but

parallel dispute between the Malian Touareg and the Malian government.

One of the reasons why France and the African Union have found it so difficult to eliminate AQIM and its associated groups is the profound instability that now characterises the Sahara and Sahel as a result of the collapse of the state in Libya. This has led to the growth in Libya of a large number of dissident and extremist groups, including Ansar al-Shari'a in Cyrenaica and, latterly, IS, particularly in Derna. These groups are extending linkages into the Saharan and Sahelian groups and into Egypt, thereby creating a wide-spread pool of insecurity and instability that is of growing concern to surrounding states, particularly Egypt and Algeria. The Sahelian groups are also extending contacts with Boko Haram in Nigeria, resulting in growing anxiety in Europe and Africa. Although the problem of "foreign fighters" there is minimal compared to the situation in Syria and Iraq, it already exists and this has implications for Europe too. Furthermore, North Africa is also one of the major sources of "foreign fighters" in Iraq and Syria.

The outlook

The account given above of the internal threats to security within the MENA region needs to be combined with the external engagement of the region with the wider world for the true dimensions of the regional crisis to be appreciated. This is described in the companion publication to this report (see Joffé, 2015c). Perhaps the most surprising consequence of such a combination of factors is the conclusion that the two powers with interests in the region most demonised by Western politicians in recent years will probably be integral to the successful resolution of the core regional problems of political extremism and the Syrian civil war. They are, of course, Russia and Iran, now the West's objective allies.

Russia remains important, despite Western suspicions and irritation over its behaviour in Ukraine, because of its access to the Syrian regime. It has become increasingly clear that a vision of the simple elimination of the Assad regime and its replacement by a liberal, democratic alternative belongs in the realm of simplistic diplomatic fantasy. Instead, in the short to medium term at least, the regime's success at maintaining itself and posing as the guarantor of Syria's minorities means that it continues to be a reality with which future policy will have to engage. It may well be that the figurehead of the regime – President Assad and his immediate family – may have to go, but its entrenched structures and institutions will have to be accommodated in any settlement of the civil war. Since Western powers have excluded themselves from such negotiations, they will have to be facilitated by the one power external to the Middle East that still has access (i.e. Russia), however distasteful this may be to European and U.S. diplomats.

Russia's success at achieving such an outcome will require regional support, and here Iran will play an essential role,

for it too has access and leverage in Damascus, just as it had in Baghdad, which it used to speed al-Maliki on his way out of the Iraqi premiership where he had done so much damage in 2014. It would, no doubt, be quite happy to repeat this success in Syria, provided its interests were suitably protected and recognised. This is one of the unspoken reasons why the Obama administration is so anxious for a successful conclusion to the P5+1 talks on Iran's nuclear ambitions, despite increasing Saudi and Israeli misgivings. Beyond this, Iran, with its de facto allies Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Shia community and the Shia-dominated government in Iraq, is becoming increasingly important in providing the U.S. with "boots on the ground" at one remove in dealing with Islamic extremism and violence in the Middle East.

And where does this leave the West's traditional partners in the region – Saudi Arabia and Egypt? They continue to be vital to Western economic interests because of Saudi Arabia's role in world oil markets and to Western security concerns, not least protecting Israel from itself, given Egypt's revival of its security relationship with Israel. However, unlike the situation 18 months ago, neither can now dominate the diplomatic scene. Instead both will have to tolerate a new geopolitical role for Iran in the region, even if the Islamic Republic itself will have to incline towards Western preferences, despite the growing resentment of hardliners within the regime and the growing likelihood of a new supreme leader in the near future. Surprisingly, despite the superficially grim outlook a year ago, new opportunities to resolve the outstanding problems of the region may be beginning to emerge. It is to be hoped that Western leaders do not waste this new opportunity as they have wasted so many in the past.

References

- Bennett, N. 2014. "For Israel, two-state is no solution." *New York Times*, November 5th.
- BICOM (British-Israel Communications and Research Centre). 2013. "Israel public opinion on the peace process." BICOM Briefing. December 5th. <<http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis-article/17672/>>
- Chafiq, C. 2015. "Pourquoi l'offre islamiste séduit une jeunesse en mal d'héroïsme." *Le Monde*, February 6th.
- Cockburn, P. 2015. *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising*. New York: OR Books.
- Dajani, O. & H. Hussein. 2014. *Past the Point of No Return? A Rights-based framework for International Engagement in Israel/Palestine*. NOREF Report. October. <<http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Israel-Palestine/Publications/Summary-Past-the-point-of-no-return-A-rights-based-framework-for-international-engagement-in-Israel-Palestine>>
- Faraj, M. A. 2000. *The Absent Obligation*. Birmingham: Maktabah al-Ansaar.
- Gladstone, R. & M. Ghannem. 2015. "Syria deaths hit new high in 2014 observer group says." *New York Times*, January 1st.
- Haaretz*. 2014. "Bennett: Israel should be 'Jewish lighthouse in Muslim storm': speaking at Saban Forum in Washington, Israel's economy minister suggests funding for 'peace industry' should be cut." December 7th.
- IPS (Institute for Palestine Studies). 2003. "The Road Map." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32(4): 83-99.
- Joffé, G. 2015a, forthcoming. "The impact of the war on Libya." In D. Henrikson & A. Karin, eds. *The Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Joffé, G. 2015b, forthcoming. "The fateful phoenix: the revival of al-Qa'ida in Iraq." *Small Wars and Insurgencies*. Special Issue: *The Fates of Allies after Intervention*.
- Joffé, G. 2015c. "*Something Wicked This Way Comes*": *Background to the New Extremist Challenge in the Middle East and North Africa*. NOREF Report. Oslo: NOREF.
- Meo, N. 2013. "Israel's new political star Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home party determined to stop Palestinian state." *Daily Telegraph*, January 19th.
- Ravid, B. 2014. "Lieberman: several Israeli Arab towns must be made part of Palestine under peace deal." *Haaretz*, January 5th.
- SAMA (Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority). 2014. *Monthly Statistical Bulletin: Reserve Assets*. Riyadh: SAMA. November.
- Shikaki, K. 2014. "The 'Jewish state': what's in the name?" NOREF Expert Analysis. <<http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Israel-Palestine/Publications/The-Jewish-state-what-s-in-the-name>>
- Tozy, M. 2008. "Desir de guerre et quête de justice." *Actes sud: la pensée du midi*, 2008/4: 22-30.
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). 2015. "Syrian Arab Republic." <<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html>>

■ THE AUTHOR

George Joffé teaches in the Department of Politics and International Studies, in the University of Cambridge. He specialises in the Middle East and North Africa.

Disclaimer

The content of this publication is presented as is. The stated points of view are those of the author and do not reflect those of the organisation for which he works or NOREF. NOREF does not give any warranties, either expressed or implied, concerning the content.



- **The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre**
- **Norsk ressurscenter for fredsbygging**

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) is a resource centre integrating knowledge and experience to strengthen peacebuilding policy and practice. Established in 2008, it collaborates and promotes collaboration with a wide network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Norway and abroad.

Read NOREF's publications on www.peacebuilding.no and sign up for notifications.

Connect with NOREF on Facebook or @PeacebuildingNO on Twitter

Email: info@peacebuilding.no - Phone: +47 22 08 79 32