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The Middle East and North Africa: Adapting to a New Paradigm

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

US and Arab military strategies across the Middle East and North Africa have failed to reverse the rise of often retrograde rebel forces in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. This stems from a refusal to acknowledge a new reality: the region is in the throes of violent, political transition that will inevitably redraw the map along ethnic and sectarian lines.

Commentary

THE MILITARY strategies of the United States and its regional allies focused on bombing campaigns, support for local militias, and inherently weak military forces to fight potential ground battles, have failed to defeat rebel forces in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. Calls for the introduction of ground forces against Islamic State (IS), the jihadist group that controls a swathe of Syria and Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen, or pumping up the number of US military personnel advising and training the Iraqi armed forces are unlikely to turn the tide.

If anything, the Marxist notion that things will get worse before they get better is nowhere more applicable than in the Middle East and North Africa. Countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, despite influxes of large numbers of refugees and/or occasional jihadist attacks, have so far succeeded in keeping strife beyond their borders.

Carve-ups are inevitable

Egypt is waging a ruthless campaign against jihadist and Bedouin groups in the northern Sinai; coupled with its brutal repression of dissent, this has turned the peninsula's population against the regime of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and threatens a rise in violence in major population centres. Bahrain, where a Saudi-backed minority regime suppressed a majority Shia revolt in 2011, is a powder keg waiting to be lit.

At the heart of the region's multiple wars and the rise of jihadist, ethnic and sectarian forces as dominant players in areas of conflict, is the quest for political transition that started off peacefully in 2011 with popular uprisings. With few exceptions like Morocco, these were countered with either brute force as in Syria and Bahrain, or counterrevolutionary moves like the 2013 military coup in Egypt, and

Saudi undermining of a real political transition in Yemen. The only exception is Tunisia where transition towards a democracy has progressed.

Ironically, disparate forces of change like IS, the Houthis, and the Kurds, and counterrevolutionary forces headed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, agree tacitly on one thing: pursuing their divergent goals involves a violent and bloody process that will carve up various states into ethnic and sectarian entities. Syria and Iraq are effectively nation states of the past. Yemen could split into two or three states. Libya faces a similar prospect.

Most analysts have written off the popular protests of 2011 that toppled the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen as a blip in history. That view is reinforced by the rise of jihadist forces and the exponential increase in number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq from all corners of the world, with the fear of blowback in Southeast Asia and the West. The reality may be very different.

Fuelling radicalisation

Refusal to nurture peaceful political change and address failed social and economic policies of autocratic regimes across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as towards Muslim immigrant communities in Europe, has cut off avenues of non-violent political expression and the venting of frustration and pent-up anger. Brutal, repressive policies fuel radicalisation with many youth vacillating between apathy that could explode at any minute, and despair that often projects religiously-packaged, nihilistic violence as their only option.

A recent report by the Institute for the Study of War warned: "The overall threat to US interests in the Middle East, abroad, and at home is rapidly accelerating. ISIS (Islamic State) has done much to undermine the paradigm that statehood yields security, a condition once reinforced by the international system... States will be challenged more often in the coming years... Threats are rising in more places globally because states have been proven vulnerable."

Military strategies that are not grounded in acceptance of the Middle East and North Africa's new realities are likely to exacerbate rather than ameliorate forces of political change. That acceptance would have to involve a plethora of US and Western policies that uncompromisingly link military aid to adoption of inclusive, non-sectarian, and non-repressive policies at home and in the region by its Middle Eastern and North African allies. It would also have to involve acceptance that extremist and jihadist groups are, at the end of the day, political animals.

Today, there may be no basis for discussion with IS. There may never be, despite the fact that IS is a political reality that is not about to disappear soon. Nonetheless, extremist groups are dynamic, not static; they adapt to political realities. IS' successful military adaptation to realities on the ground is a case in point. So are changing, if only tactical, approaches by Jabhat al-Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, in areas it controls. Israeli officials privately concede that Hamas, the Islamist militia that controls the Gaza Strip, has accepted a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The problem is lack of political will on both sides and disagreement on the terms of negotiation.

Short-term deterioration v long-term stability

US-led negotiations with Iran to resolve the nuclear crisis have served as a lightning rod that justifies sectarian policies which Saudi Arabia adopted on a global scale after the Iranian popular revolt in 1979 toppled the Shah. That has translated into discrimination of Shiite communities in the kingdom, Bahrain and Kuwait, and an unproductive, devastating bombing campaign in Yemen. The rise of Shiite nationalism in Iraq constitutes the writing on the wall.

The implications of such a stance are not that they will further empower an allegedly expansionary, imperial Iran and jihadist groups, and threaten the stability of US allies. Things will get worse in the Middle East and North Africa no matter what, and the stability of autocratic regimes remains in question.

Military strategies need to recognise that the Middle East and North Africa are in the throes of a brutal process of change that is likely to play out over the years. Attempting to halt the process is futile; nurturing it with policies that encourage non-violent, non-sectarian change - even if it means a

redrawing of the region's map and regime change - will ultimately far better serve the reestablishment of regional peace and security. Short-term deterioration may be the price for long-term stability.

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, Germany.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg