

FIVE FACTORS AFFECTING STABILITY AND SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT: There are five factors that affect security and stability in the Middle East. The first of these is the ticking bomb of sectarianism between the Sunni and Shiite strands of Islam, which have become more widespread in recent years due to the politisation of sectarian tensions and their transformation among some actors to a means to achieve political demands. Secondly, the impact of the Arab revolutions and the accompanying rise of Islamist groups through the new democratic tendencies encouraged by those revolutions. Thirdly, Iran's behaviour through the use of both direct and indirect threats to several countries in the region. Fourthly, the existence of a fertile environment for terrorist groups in Yemen. Finally, the struggle between Arabs and Israelis over the existence of the State of Israel and the plight of the Palestinians. This article provides a clear set of linkages between these and investigates them with the intention of enhancing understanding and encouraging debate.

KEYWORDS: Middle East, Islamists, Arab Revolutions, Sunni, Shi-ite, Terrorism, Arabs, Israel

INTRODUCTION

In the current political climate of the Middle East, five main tension areas – powder kegs – have the potential to upset the tenuous balance and trigger wide-scale hostilities that are unlikely to remain localised. These are identified in this work as: 1. intra-national tensions among Palestinian Arabs and between Palestinians and Israelis, 2. heightened sectarianism between Sunni and Shia Muslims, 3. the growing Iranian regional threat, 4. swelling terrorist organisations in Yemen, and 5. the proliferation and reinvigoration of Islamists encouraged by the recent Arab revolutions. This work analyses these sources of tension to understand the nature of the risks they pose to the wider regional and international environment, and

suggests sustainable ways to inhibit conflict and its potential spill-over.

PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

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The Arab-Israeli conflict continues to be a hotbed of instability in the Middle East, largely due to its duration and the absence of any significant arbitration.¹ After more than 60 years, this conflict challenges regional peace and undermines stability;² it has – at least theoretically – been cited as the cause of open hostilities of a symmetric and asymmetric nature and is responsible for an ensuing security dilemma and its accompanying arms race.³

In 2002, during an Arab League Summit (Beirut), the representatives of the Arab states presented an initiative to resolve this dispute through establishing and normalising diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for the latter's withdraw from the Golan Heights (Syria) and a general return to its pre-1967 borders, including from Palestinian territories in the West Bank (of the Jordan River).⁴ This initiative was consistent with UNSC resolutions 242 and 333,⁵ though posed a challenge to Israel since any full return to its pre-1967 borders would require a relinquishing of direct sovereignty over an important part of Jerusalem which is, in addition to being an inter-faith meeting point and a sacred city, also happens to be Israel's largest population centre and economic hub.⁶

In addition to the status of Jerusalem and the viability of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, two other issues act as a potential trigger for local and regional hostilities. First, millions of Palestinians continue to be refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria as well as in the US, Canada and throughout Europe. While such refugees do not directly pose a threat to the peace in the Middle East, they are often used as excuses for mass mobilisations, directed hostilities against Israel and its allies and may even be found in the rhetoric of both al Qaeda and Iran. While it is clear that Israel needs to amend the situation facing Palestinian refugees, it is equally clear that Palestine has become a rallying beacon in the Islamic world and may therefore, indirectly, spark unnecessary tension and, potentially violence.

Second, an Israel and Syria continue to be mired in a regional rivalry – as recent (February 2013) events attest – with the former

maintaining its annexation of the so-called Shebaa Farms (Syria and Lebanon) and the Golan Heights (Syria) which it acquired during the 1967 Six-Day war.⁷ This has acted as a hurdle to a negotiated settlement though is mirrored – if not eclipsed – by Syria's support for Hezbollah (and its former support for HAMAS) and its deep alliance with Iran, both of which are recognised as Israel's most formidable challengers.

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It is worth noting that the Israel-Egypt, Israel-Jordan and even Israel-GCC has stabilised and the likelihood of organised violence between these states is increasingly remote; despite the unfolding events in Egypt following the demise of the Mubarak regime.

Despite the potential of conflict escalation between Israel and Palestine and Israel and Syria, peace-making efforts have not stalled. Indeed, in April 2011, a number of former Israeli security officials such as James Berry, Ami Ayalon (Mossad), Danny Yatom and Amnon Evkin Shahak (Chief of Staff) presented a disengagement initiative that sought Israel's withdrawal from East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip to make room for the creation of Palestine. Since the Palestinian issue is widely interpreted as humanitarian first and strategic second, it is interesting that this initiative was geared towards Palestine at the expense of Syria. In other words, Israel seems ready to make some compromises with Palestine but is much less inclined to do so with Syria.⁸

Unfortunately, this Israeli-originated disengagement initiative fell on deaf ears; there were no follow-up discussions, no negotiations and, generally, no real interest in the plan. Indeed, it is striking that such important former Israeli security figures were simply marginalised by Netanyahu and his administration, which essentially killed the initiative since a wide assortment of Arab states – and the Arab League for that matter – would not endorse the initiative since it was not reinforced by any official proclamations of support. Additionally, the initiative came at a very unstable time in Arab and Middle Eastern politics; the so-called Arab Spring had already kicked off and was threatening to alter strategic relationships throughout the region. Hence, the Arab League states were compelled to deal with internal issues rather than focusing on their foreign affairs.

Modern Arab societies have grown up on a declared hatred

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toward Israel.⁹ Many of the Arab countries have raised a number of generations through school curricula that feed this hatred and remind the students that the state of Israel enforces a continuing occupation on Palestine, and that the day must come when they get back the stolen land, thereby enhancing the persistence of this conflict.

The state of Israel is home to the Jewish people, who have suffered from the scourge of global conflict and persecution, and this ideology is rooted in the conscience of the world.¹⁰ Some of the world's countries such as the USA and UK have provided a helping hand to establish the State of Israel through the land of Palestine as a country for the Jews, who suffered from the Holocaust with subsequent social fragmentation and a loss of national identity.¹¹ When King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia met with US President Roosevelt in 1945, he said that the Arabs would not be satisfied if the land of Palestine were given over to the Jews, and that the Arabs would not be quiet about that and could be expected to struggle against such a development for a long time. He further stated that the plight of the Jews was the responsibility of Germany and not that of the Arabs.¹²

Based on my own experience of living with and studying among the new generation of young Arabs, I can testify they have a strong enthusiasm to continue what they perceive as an inherent conflict with Israel. Generally speaking, these young people perceive the Arab governments as collaborators with Israel and as being keen to stay in power without fighting a new war. This is confirmed by what happened to the Israel Embassy in Cairo on September 8 of 2011 after the fall of the regime of Hosni Mubarak, when a mob of enthusiastic young people surrounded the embassy of Israel, threatened the staff and burned the Israeli flag and destroyed official papers.¹³

It is important to recognise that while future generations will not have tasted the horrors of previous wars, they will, however, be very excited to fight new battles as a result of being rooted in a culture that encourages them to break the theory of norms of the Israeli occupation, according to Arab customs. During election campaigns and discussions, the political slogans of the parties and the Arab governments rely on this conflict to gain votes and sup-

port. Textbooks and scientific topics always put this conflict first in terms of national priorities, and therefore these ideas are deeply engrained into Arab generations, who will not easily give them up.

In a superficial sense, this conflict is now stable, but this stability is analogous to the case of a passive volcano, which boils from the inside and has the potential to erupt unexpectedly at any time. Any solution to this conflict and the avoidance of further confrontations can be achieved only through sacrifice and compromise. The Arabs have presented some of these necessary concessions in return for a radical solution to this conflict. When we return to previous periods, the Arabic discourse used harsher language in demanding an end to the occupation of Palestinian land in full and on time, but in the meantime, has given up some of that vehemence through the initiative of 2002.

On the other hand, Israel does not make concrete concessions and does not accept the necessity to give up any part of Jerusalem in return for an end to this conflict. Moreover, recently the Israel government has refused the international attempts to stop the building of settlements in East Jerusalem and Jericho.¹⁴ In addition, through the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, the Arabs consider Palestinian Autonomy to be a right, not a grant from the Israeli government.

And thus the Israeli stand is an obstacle blocking the possibility of any concessions for the development of a solution satisfactory to all parties. If Israel sincerely wishes a peaceful solution to this conflict, it must take the initiative to infuse a new spirit in the Arab initiative or resolve to keep the conflict going and be open about this.

THE TICKING BOMB OF SECTARIANISM

Over the past three decades, there has been an upsurge in the sectarian strife between Shiites and Sunnis in the Middle East to an unprecedented degree, with the last outbreak becoming visible through the recent Arab uprisings. Some of the rebels or governments have relied upon communal allegiances as means for the success of their ambitions. We note that in Bahrain the rebels arose from the Shiite community, whereas the Sunnis continue to support the government.¹⁵ On the contrary, in Syria, the rebels have

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accused the Shiite-based Syrian government of depending on Shiite personnel to oppress the rebels.¹⁶

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Long-term observers of the Middle East are aware that sectarian divisions have not been a problem in the past and there has been no strife between the two Islamic communities such as all too frequently exists today. The social and ideological changes that have taken place in the region since 1978 have played an active role in reaching the current state of congestion. These variables are summarised by the following factors:

1. Iran's Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 under the leadership of the Ayatollah Khomeini, which was based on the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists (or *welayat-e faqih*) under the doctrine of the Shiites. This means that the supreme leader will be a religious figure and all actions of government will be in reference to Shiite Muslims, both politically and ideologically. The Shiites that live in many Arab countries, according to Shiite belief, are required to be loyal to the Shiite religious leader in Tehran and he becomes their main religious authority and political reference.¹⁷
2. The Islamic awakening, which began in the Sunni Islamist groups in the Middle East. There are many examples, such as the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia by militants in 1979, who called for the establishment of an Islamic state under the leadership of the Mahdi.¹⁸ Also significant was the growing movement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which in 1980 led to the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.¹⁹ Moreover, the growth of Salafi groups in Algeria and in many countries in the Middle East also reflected this growth of fundamentalism.²⁰ This awakening has contributed to the emergence of atonement for many of the Islamic currents and especially the Shiites and has caused many other Muslims to consider them as outside of the Islamic religion.
3. The implications of the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988. Over its eight-year duration, this war contributed to the extension of a political base in the Middle East based on sectarianism through international relations when the Sunni governments aided the Sunni Iraqi government, while the Syrian Shiite government stood against the Iraqis and pro-

vided moral assistance to Iran.²¹

4. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. When U.S. troops entered Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein collapsed, there was chaos and a breakdown of security, which contributed to the penetration of al-Qaeda to Iraq,²² as well as the influx into Iraq of many of the Shiite militants that had been opponents of the former Iraqi regime.²³ The declared goal of al-Qaeda is to fight U.S. forces and their goal of expelling all U.S. troops from Arab countries has been proclaimed through the statements of its leaders such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.²⁴ At the same time, suicide bombings occurred in the mainly Shiite cities and the holy Shiite religious sites. The Shiites accused al-Qaeda, after which there were similar bombings in Sunni communities. Unfortunately, the attacks were repeated on both sides and are still continuing. This conflict between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq has contributed more sectarian tension to the whole region.
5. The technological revolution. We regretfully note the recent spread in the Middle East of the many television channels that incite sectarianism through criticism and the atonement doctrine and provide a platform for the instigators, such as the Alburhan channel, the Fadak channel and the World channel.

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Some may argue about the seriousness of the purported sectarian divisions and do not consider such to be a source of concern for the composition of the conflict in the Middle East. However, the Sunni and Shiite communities share many of the geographical locations in one country; in some countries, such as Iraq, the majority of citizens belong to the Shiite community,²⁵ while in other countries, such as in Syria, the majority belong to the Sunni community.²⁶ In light of this geographical proximity, any increase in tensions is very likely to turn into civil wars, as happened in Lebanon, which had formerly been a multi-cultural state of long standing.

Historically, sectarian conflicts are likely to be bitter and deep, as was the case in Europe between Catholics and Protestants between 1618 and 1648.²⁷ In Europe, there was a historic difference between the end of the sectarian war and the beginning of the political revolutions in France, which started in 1789, while in Germany these upheavals did not take place until the beginning of 1918.²⁸ But in the

Middle East, we are witnessing a dramatic interplay between the revolution towards democracy and sectarian tension.

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The Middle East is facing difficult choices and the possibilities for change remain open, especially after the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Iraq. Sectarian tension in the region and political sectarianism in Iraq are the influential factors to create a post-crisis in 2011 in Iraq.

To find a solution to this tension remains difficult, but when governments become less rigid, the convulsions of sectarianism will be solved more easily. It is to be regretted that some governments are contributing to the sectarian tension; for example, in the revolution of Bahrain, the dominant Shiite governments in Iraq and Iran have stated that they stand with the rebels and their demands. If the governments of Iraq and Iran already stand with the right to self-determination for the peoples of the Middle East, how is it they can support the Syrian government in its violent suppression of its own citizens, both peaceful demonstrators and, increasingly, rebels bearing arms?

Ideally, the rise of a political elite and a consciously involved and aware citizenry is the solution for the region, but this is difficult to achieve in the short term. At present, the Middle East is experiencing the Arab revolutions, which are moving toward democracy, as in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, which contributes to the formation of a political environment conducive to national action and that will allow these communities to move away from religious sectarianism.

THE IRANIAN THREAT

Since the 1978 Islamic Revolution, Iranian political discourse has taken the form of threats and intimidation towards many countries in the Middle East. These threats have focused on each of the Gulf States and Israel in particular. With the inauguration of President Ahmadinejad in 2004, this style of threat making has intensified, from the president and the government members,²⁹ as well as giving help to terrorist organisations in the Middle East such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthis in Yemen.³⁰

The Islamic revolution in Iran is based on the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, which, according to Islamic law, is the only representative of the expected Mahdi, a messianic figure especially re-

vered by Shias.³¹ This is made clear according to certain items mentioned in Articles 5 and 107 of the Iranian constitution, and thus, as the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, the government of Iran is considered (by the Iranian authorities) to be the de facto leader of the Muslims. According to the narrative provided by the Iranian Constitution, according to the introduction of the Iranian Constitution, it is stipulated that the Iranian Army will be developed to become an ideological army and do the necessary work in the service of the Lord and to provide for the extension of divine power in the world.³²

Jeffrey Osman discusses the basic structure of the political and legal system in Iran and he says all components of the Iranian Republic of Iran are based on two important points. The first point concerns the sovereignty of the Guardianship of the Jurist, proclaiming that he is the representative of God. The second point maintains that sovereignty is not guaranteed solely to the people of Iran, but rather extends to all Muslims everywhere.³³

In 1997, the Foundation for Organizing and Disseminating the Heritage of Imam Khomeini in Tehran issued a book called *Exporting Revolution as Seen by the Imam Khomeini, Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Tehran*. This book expresses interest in causing Iran to export Islamic revolution and in that way to bring about an Islamic world under the leadership of the religious leader in Tehran. Many pages of this book are devoted to the goal of the political regime in Tehran to export the revolution to Islamic countries, especially Arabic ones.³⁴ On the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution in 1980, Imam Khomeini said: 'We are working to export our revolution to various parts of the world.' In 1983, the Guardianship of the Jurist in Iran, now Ali Khamenei, said, 'the revolution knows no boundaries and cannot be imprisoned by walls, but rather it must be exported'.³⁵

In the Gulf States there is a stimulating environment to export the Islamic revolution, based on the following three basic pillars:

1. The presence of Shiite imams who are loyal both intellectually and spiritually to the dogmatic system of Iran, which has contributed to all the Gulf countries having become a fertile environment for the promotion of ideological ideas of the Iranian revolution by the presence of the numerous individuals who are strong supporters.³⁶ Many Shiites travel from the Gulf countries to Iran under the pretext of seek-

ing knowledge in the seminaries of Iran.³⁷ These seminaries or religious councils have adapted their ideas to extend the influence of the religious Guardianship of the Jurist and the dissemination of these beliefs in Islamic countries.

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2. Iran hopes to play a pivotal role in the region of the Middle East. Standing in front of that aspiration are the Gulf States, which, as a result of their possession of powerful economic instruments based on oil production, makes them of interest to Muslims and gives them a major role in regional developments. In the view of the Iranian leadership, exporting the principles of the revolution may be the appropriate solution to an imbalance of forces, considering that the Guardianship of the Jurist is the primary reference in Iran, along with the presence of human assets throughout the Gulf, which contribute to the export of the concepts of Islamic revolution.
3. Contributing to these factors are the presence of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque in Saudi Arabia, the holy places for Muslims, making them a catalyst to making the Gulf a key target of that revolution. Doubtless, any authority having the control of the holy places for Muslims will be considered as the moral authority of the Muslims, which is the ultimate goal of the Guardianship of the Jurist.³⁸

Various Iranian authorities frequently make threats to the Gulf States in public statements and Iranian agents are often accused of interference in their affairs. These observations can be backed up by remembering the remarks of the Leader of the Revolution Imam Khomeini, when he said in August 4, 1987 in the Kayhan newspaper threatening those who are the hosts of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque (that is, the government of Saudi Arabia): 'We will punish them with God's help at the right time.'³⁹ These statements have been repeated on a permanent basis, but subsequent statements have gone beyond this in the threat to attach some Gulf States to the Iranian state as provinces. For example, in 2007, in a press statement by the Hussein Shariatmadari representative of the Guardianship of the Jurist in Kayhan newspaper, he said that Bahrain was a province of the Iranian state and even the Bahrain people are demanding their return to their "Mother Home".⁴⁰

The Republican Guard foundation known as the "Quds Force" is the military wing in charge of the foreign operations of the Republi-

can Guard.⁴¹ I have mentioned previously the priorities of Iran's military to export the revolution; however, the Quds Force is a secret organisation that does not make public its goals and aspirations. In October 2011, the U.S. accused the Quds Force of planning to carry out bombings in the U.S. to target the Saudi embassy and kill the Saudi ambassador.⁴² In early 2011, Kuwait fingered a spy ring as conducting espionage of political and military interests in Kuwait and sending its findings to Iran. Also, in November 2011, the authorities of Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia announced the arrest of cells targeting vital installations and embassies in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and, after investigation, Bahrain announced that this cell had received support from Iran.⁴³

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Field Commander of the Quds Force is Qassem Suleimani⁴⁴ but the true leadership remains the Guardianship of the Jurist Ali Khamenei as the spiritual leader of the Quds Force.⁴⁵ Suleimani has been included on lists of international sanctions, and some countries have placed the Quds Force on the list of terrorist groups,⁴⁶ but this man is still uncertain about their aspirations for the future. However, the Fars News Agency published a statement issued by Major General Qassem Suleimani in front of fifty thousand members of the Basij and he said that in the region a number of revolutions are occurring and these revolutions all draw inspiration from the Iranian revolution.⁴⁷

That statement reflects the reality that Suleimani's thoughts are strategically rooted towards the export of the Iranian revolution and do not stop at the Arab Spring, but aspire to link the Arab revolutions to the principles of the Iranian revolution, which is based on the sovereignty of the Guardianship of the Jurist. Designating the leader of the Iranian Quds Force is the decision of the Guardianship of the Jurist.

Although the Iranian government has repeatedly stated that the country's nuclear program is peaceful,⁴⁸ the International Atomic Energy Agency published a report in November 2011 that indicated that there were strong doubts about the military direction connected to the enrichment of uranium.⁴⁹ Iran's nuclear program has become a source of threat to the region and, at the same time, an excuse for neighbouring countries to create similar programs and thus become a nuclear power, which contributes to the instability of the region.

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Forty percent of the world's oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz,⁵⁰ which Iran has frequently threatened to close – most recently in early 2012, when Iran threatened the world and the countries of the region during military exercises that it was conducting in the vicinity of the Straits of Hormuz.⁵¹ This is a threat to the world in general and not just to the economy of the Gulf States. The achievement of this threat could be to drastically disrupt the world economy and the public life of many of its citizens. It is certain that the states of the world, especially the major powers, will not tolerate this and will prevent any closing of the Straits of Hormuz, which brings up the danger this could be achieved only through an Iranian and international military conflict in the Middle East.

On the other hand, the Arab-Israeli conflict has, ironically, created a healthy environment for the export of the Iranian revolution to the Arab countries, by identifying its goals with the inspired feelings of Muslims and calling upon their sympathy, thereby paving the way for many people to embrace Iran's revolutionary thought. Iran has frequently used verbal threats against Israel⁵² and considers it the first enemy of the state of Iran as a means to attract the notice of the Arabs and Muslims about the political structure of the revolution.

We can analyse and confirm this approach according to the following factors:

- I. Iran does not support peaceful solutions to resolve the Palestinian issue. On the contrary, the country is working to deepen the differentiation and ideological separation between the Palestinian parties of Hamas and Fatah so as to break the international peace efforts and to further postpone any resolution of the Palestinian decision. This is confirmed by the Iranian support for Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, home to about a million people, and which provides hospitals, staff and public service in this sector that has need of outside economic support.⁵³ By providing this support for Hamas, Iran continues to prolong the separation of Hamas from the national government of Palestine, which supports peaceful solutions and continues to negotiate with permanent international institutions and Israel government parties to find solutions to the conflict. Hamas, in contrast, continues to rely first on military escalation and renounces

peaceful solutions.

2. Iran supports the creation of a turbulent environment on the Israeli-Lebanese border through support for Hezbollah, both financially and militarily. However, Iran does not support its strategic ally Syria to regain the Golan Heights, which is evident through the lack of support similar to that given to Hezbollah, as reported in the media. At the same time, Iran does not support Hezbollah with sophisticated weapons, only limited armaments despite the existence of an appropriate environment to send advanced military systems to Hezbollah, which controls much Lebanese territory,⁵⁴ all of which is of primary importance to Syria, Iran's one strategic ally in the region.

Then, Iran, on principle and through political procedures, does not support an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict and works actively to create a turbulent atmosphere around this conflict as a means to inspire the feelings of Muslims by inflammatory statements and support for Hezbollah. All this is done in order to spread the principles of the revolution and expand the influence of the Guardianship of the Jurist and to establish Tehran as a political capital for the Muslims.

SECURITY AND STABILITY IN YEMEN

Yemen suffers from the lack of security and stability, which constitutes a threat both directly and indirectly to the stability of the Middle East. There are various armed groups in Yemen and a widening conflict that could become a civil war. As a result of dependence on the power of tribal forces and the inability of the government to establish and maintain security in Yemen,⁵⁵ the country has become a magnet for extremists and fugitives from justice.

On Christmas Day of 2009, an al-Qaeda-affiliated bomber tried to blow up a Northwest airliner that was heading from Amsterdam to Detroit in the United States. Investigations showed that the man accused of involvement in the bombing of the plane, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, had received training in Yemen under the auspices of al-Qaeda. Before this attempt, an attempt in the summer of 2010 had been made to murder the Saudi Assistant Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef by an assailant believed to have come from Ye-

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men prior to the attack.⁵⁶

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As an organisation, al-Qaeda received a number of blows after 2001, which contributed to the collapse of its aspirations and goals.⁵⁷ But, in Yemen, al-Qaeda soon found a suitable environment for re-constituting its infrastructure, and established bases for basic training and planning.⁵⁸ The United States has released many members of al-Qaeda who had been detainees in the Guantanamo prison and returned them to their countries. Some of these releasees have undergone programs to advise them, as well as programs to establish their eligibility for repatriation. However, some of these releasees fled to Yemen to re-unite with al-Qaeda.⁵⁹

Individuals who sympathise with the ideology of al-Qaeda find that they can always resort to tribal areas in various Middle Eastern countries, as happened in Afghanistan and the Pakistani-Afghan border areas, as well as the mountainous geographical environments that are a feature of these areas.⁶⁰ This is what is available in Yemen, where members of al-Qaeda can make the rugged mountains of the region a new command centre, rather than the Afghan-Pakistani mountains, where the organisation has recently received several severe blows – most significantly, the death of its leader, Osama bin Laden.

In addition to the al-Qaeda organisation is the Houthis group in northern Yemen, which has been fighting the Yemeni government at least since 2004, when its leader Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was killed by government forces.⁶¹ It is true that this organisation has not exported its ideology outside of Yemen, but the basic rule of this organisation is based on the moral expression of aims dedicated to the spilling of blood and doing murder to individuals of the West and Israel,⁶² which indicates at least an intellectual link between al-Qaeda and Houthis as regards the identity of the enemy. The two groups, however, differ in religious outlook. This organisation has suffered from successive blows from the Yemeni army in six wars, which have contributed to reducing the seriousness of this organisation, and these circumstances have frustrated the group's efforts to gain control of North Yemen and export its particular form of evil to the outside.

There is no doubt that the recent political events in Yemen in the form of protests and sit-ins and confrontations with security that have resulted from the public demand for the departure of

President Ali Abdullah Saleh, have contributed to creating a stable environment for terrorist organisations in Yemen to re-arrange their structures and to be able to operate more freely.⁶³

Yemen is a very poor country and, without assistance, the Yemeni government is unlikely to gain control over al-Qaeda in the south or the Houthis in the north. Even were the authorities to try to address one of these organisations, it would not be able to address the other at the same time. International solidarity and especially the countries of the Middle East would be able to help Yemen cope with these organisations, although this assistance should take the form of economic not military aid, to preclude any interpretations that this aid is a form of intervention in the internal affairs of Yemen. Rather, what is needed is economic and logistical assistance that will help in building a military force to help Yemen to eliminate these organisations and to curb the danger to the region and the international community.

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THE ARAB REVOLUTIONS

Many world powers have supported the rebellious peoples in the Middle East, morally and financially as well as militarily. This support can be interpreted as arising from the current mental and intellectual development of individual world citizens who share a belief in the benefits of democracy and the basics of good governance as the official form of the modern international organisation.⁶⁴ However, the results of these revolutions and the popular yearning for modern democracy in the Middle East have also contributed to the rise of Muslim Brotherhood groups and Salafi Islam.

This trend was illustrated dramatically in Tunisia when the Islamic Renaissance Party, which was inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood,⁶⁵ took a dominating lead in the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia elections, with 41 percent of the vote, and thus, control of the majority of seats in the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia compared to other parties.⁶⁶ In Egypt as well, election results showed a win for the Muslim Brotherhood, with 40 percent of the vote and the Salafi Muslims with 20 percent of the vote, which means these members of the Islamic movement will have control of the Egyptian People's Assembly.⁶⁷

Under the former regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, these parties

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were banned and repressed by the government and many members of these Islamic groups were put in prison. For example, the deposed President of Tunisia Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had thousands of members of the Renaissance Party imprisoned.⁶⁸ The current President Hamadi Jebali of Tunisia spent nearly 15 years in prison, including 10 years in solitary confinement.⁶⁹

In Libya, the Islamists contributed greatly to the success of the Revolution. For example, Karim Belhadj, military commander of the rebels in Tripoli, was an internationally wanted alleged terrorist for his association with al-Qaeda and fighting in Afghanistan. Belhadj was arrested in 2004 by the U.S. government and was handed over to Libya the same year. At the present time, Islamists have military control in the country, and Islamist militias were prominent among the groups that liberated Tripoli from the former Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, which was the final and essential stage clearing the way for eventual elections to create a new and, it is hoped, more representative government.⁷⁰

The outcome is not yet clear on the impact of the rise of Islamic organisations on the reins of power in those countries. These organisations have been able to establish a valid presence and make progress within the revolutions through popular choice; however, in the past, these organisations have played suspicious roles in destabilising the security and stability in some countries of the Middle East. For example, Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of the leaders of al-Qaeda, is a graduate of the dominant Islamic organisation in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷¹ The Islamic organisations in Egypt are based on the ideas of Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Yahya Hashim and other founders of these organisations.⁷² Some of these organisations have committed numerous crimes, such as the assassination of former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat⁷³ and the massacre of Deir el-Bahari in 1997,⁷⁴ during which about 62 people were killed, as well as many other crimes that have claimed the lives of hundreds and wounded many more over the past 60 years.

Thus, given this history, the rise of Islamist groups to decision-making positions over geopolitical, economic and military sectors in important countries of the Middle East such as Egypt is worrying. The history of those organisations and their goals raise the question of whether their avowed goals and methods are in non-conformance with the development of peace and stability in

the region.

Despite the concern generated by the rise of these groups, we must also note that the ideas of some of these groups have changed and become more open. Abdelhakim Belhadj, a founding member of the Libyan Fighting Group, which is an al-Qaeda offshoot, after his release from prison, wrote a book entitled *Studies in the Concepts of Jihad and Accountability and Governance to the People*.⁷⁵ This book can be seen as a form of corrective to traditional notions of jihad in the theories of Islamist militants.

Another example is that of Rashid al-Ghannushi, who is a theoretical leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party, which is a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and a winner of the recent Tunisian elections. Ghannushi has written many books such as *Public Freedoms in the Islamic State*⁷⁶ and *The Islamic Movement and the Issue of change*.⁷⁷ These books are considered to represent a historic shift in the concepts of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the Middle East, as they deal with the freedom of other, non-Muslim parties in thought and religion, considering peaceful coexistence with them as well as the liberation of women and achieving collective security for all people, whether in the same country or at the regional and international level.

In the same direction, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, which is established on the basis of Islamic ideas,⁷⁸ provides a fine example of moderate Islam, even with a conservative outlook. These developments can provide Islamist moderates a source of comfort as a number of Islamist groups appear to be on the verge of assuming the leadership of some of the countries in the Middle East through democratic means.

However, the Middle East has suffered previously from Islamic organisations. Even if the regulations regarding the ideas and objectives of these organisations are amended to be less dogmatic, this process needs to go through long stages in order to ensure that such changes are accepted by all adherents of the previous ideas.

We live in a crucial stage of the ideological changes now taking place in the political structure of the Middle East. These changes are certain to affect the peaceful life and security stability in the Middle East, either directly or indirectly. Certainly it is not inevitable that we have to take an ominous view as far as concerns the reality that we are living. After all, if these organisations can successfully

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participate in the creation of a healthy democracy in the region and help make it a zone free from any manifestation of violence or the threat to security, the way will be clear for developing the region as a safe environment for the life of all individuals, regardless of belief or background.

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CONCLUSION

It seems that the Middle East is on the verge of a new and historical period, which contains within it seeds of embarrassment for many of the countries involved. There remains the dormant but smouldering volcano of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, there is the reality of sectarian divisions that directly challenge the stability of the region, especially if these divisions are allowed to politicise the region. Further, various Iranian authorities issue threats to countries in the region and the world, and make it plain that they are willing to consider the use of military force to disrupt regional and international interests, while frequently making direct threats against specific countries; none of which actions, of course, are conducive to calm in the region. In Yemen, terrorist organisations have found a new home for the realignment and consolidation of their memberships, with Al-Qaeda settling in the south of Yemen and the Houthis in the north. Al-Qaeda has become much more closely entwined in the region after having been based thousands of kilometres away in Afghanistan. These troubles are not limited to those threats, as Salafist Islamic groups and the Muslim Brotherhood have found the various Arab revolutions an attractive way to get to the centres of power in those countries.

We must understand that the complexity of these conflicts and the diversity of the rules by which each is constrained raises concerns for the difficulty of controlling all of these conflicts arising at the same time. But when we understand the reasons and motives for the formation of such conflicts and analyse them, we will be better able to develop appropriate ideas, and to balance the scenarios in ways that will curb the risks to the Middle East. Only in this way can we expect to offer help to the peoples involved so as to give them hope of a future time when the region is more peaceful and free from all forms of conflict.

Clearly, to provide more political concessions and help promote

the rise of political and intellectual elites both morally and by providing logistical support to help poor countries such as Yemen would be a strong foundation for greater stability and would help achieve the dream of peoples in the region for stability and security.

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