CHANGING GEOPOLITICS AND THE EMERGING ORDER OF THE MIDDLE EAST: CHALLENGES AHEAD, WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

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March 2017
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About Istanbul Policy Center
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This report and the preceding conference “Changing Geopolitics and the Emerging Order of the Middle East: Challenges Ahead, What the Future Holds” was made possible by a grant from the Sasakawa Peace Foundation.
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Istanbul, March 2017
Altay Atlı and Bülent Aras
CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Venue: Middle East Institute National University of Singapore (NUS) 29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace 119620 Singapore

Date: January 12, 2017

09:00–10:00 Welcome, Coffee, and Opening Remarks

10:00–12:00 Panel I
A Non-Westphalian Regional Order in the Middle East?

Chair: Prof. Eng Seng Ho, Director, Middle East Institute, NUS

Speakers: Prof. Bülent Aras, Senior Scholar, Istanbul Policy Center
Prof. Ryoji Tateyama, Senior Scholar, National Defense Academy Japan

12:00–13:30 Lunch

13:30–15:30 Panel II
Shifting Alliances in the Middle East

Chair: Dr. Ali Kadri, Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, NUS

Speakers: Dr. Altay Atlı, Research Fellow, Istanbul Policy Center
Mr. Bunn Nagara, Senior Fellow, Institute of Strategic & International Studies Malaysia

15:30–16:00 Coffee Break

16:00–18:00 Panel III
The Gulf Moment in the Middle East: Assessment and Prospects

Chair: Dr. Zoltan Pall, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, NUS

Speakers: Dr. Pınar Akpınar, Research Fellow, Istanbul Policy Center
Mr. Mattia Tomba, Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, NUS

Conference discussants:
Prof. Kota Suechika, Faculty Member, Department of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University
Dr. Ei Sun Oh, Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Dr. Akiko Yoshioka, Senior Analyst, Institute of Energy Economics Japan
Mr. Serkan Yolaçan, Research Associate, Middle East Institute, NUS
CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The conference “Changing Geopolitics and the Emerging Order of the Middle East: Challenges Ahead, What the Future Holds” has been a joint endeavor of Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) at Sabanci University and Middle East Institute at National University of Singapore. It was held in Singapore at the Middle East Institute with the participation of academics from Turkey, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore and researchers and students of the hosting institution. This conference is part of a wider project of IPC on “Inter-Regional Cooperation and Globalization” funded by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in Japan.

Preceding the conference, the IPC project team conducted multi-country field research and produced a policy paper on the emerging geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) after the Arab Spring. Following an extensive review of the existing literature, field research was conducted in three countries, Lebanon, Qatar, and Tunisia. A total of seven to eight interviews were conducted in each country with a broad array of participants including experts, academics, policy makers, opinion leaders, NGO personnel, journalists, and activists over a period of two months. The agendas of the current political systems in the MENA, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia and even in more stable countries such as Iran and Turkey, are defined by the priority to fight back security concerns. This, however, does not rescind the need to face the growing pile of political, economic, and social problems. Moving away from the preoccupation with current challenges, the Arab Spring as a process has also produced its own dynamics towards a new order, which would have to take into account the interests of non-state actors and discontented masses beyond the international balance of power. The MENA region is aspiring for a peace settlement that would define the basis of a new order. Yet, this is far from a foreseeable task as the stakeholders are still on a collision course to settle their geostrategic scores.

The conference took this research to a new level, with inputs on the policy paper and beyond by the participants from Turkey and several Asian countries. After the conference, the project team put this brief report together to present the comprehensive discussions on the vital issues of the new geopolitics of the Middle East to academic and policy communities. The project team aims at connecting Asia and the MENA, making new sense of issues and problems through Asian and Turkish perspectives and experiences and producing policy-relevant research with the active engagement of experts from Turkey and selected Asian countries. The outcome of this international conference is related to the interests of Turkey and three Asian countries, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore, in a way that would help these countries pursue stability, security, and development-resilient policies toward the Middle East. This policy report will be an important outcome for the overall project to serve this purpose.
In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, longstanding alliances in the Middle East have been shifting as countries and leaders restructure their positions. Particularly noticeable has been the rise of partial and contingent issue-based alliances at the expense of longstanding wholesale and transgenerational loyalties. Such alliance formations are multilayered, being intra-state and inter-state, and include non-state actors, old and new.

The Arab uprisings were sparked by the political, social, and economic demands of the people, who resisted the old regimes in a non-violent way unified beyond sectarian and other traditional lines of division. The protests, however, did not produce the progressive change that was expected. The refusal to change by entrenched elites fighting for survival blocked the path to progress, and the vacuum created by the erosion of state and ideological authority was filled not by the democratic ideals that the people on the street were asking for but by extreme, jihadist ideas and organizations from the periphery. Middle Eastern geopolitics became increasingly fluid, leaving regional order in a destructive cycle of security dilemmas between relevant actors without a definitive common good.

Arab uprisings weakened key states in the region and empowered various non-state actors, leading to new regional dynamics of proxy war and competitive interventions. At a time when the United States was downsizing its commitments and leaving more responsibility to its local allies, Arab regimes faced significant threat perceptions not from Israel, Iran, or jihadists but rather from domestic democratic activism and demands for regime change. In some cases, even greater threat came from reformist Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively. Under these circumstances, regimes committed to securing themselves and their allies, which paved the way for a certain form of collective regime security. A combination of threat and opportunity motivated the actors in the region to be more active; while Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Jordan emerged as key allies, non-Arab actors such as Turkey, Israel, and Iran were increasingly drawn into Arab political confrontations.

The most crucial observation in the Middle East with respect to alliances is that cross-sectarian and cross-regional alliances have led to an ever-dynamic realignment of strategic interests. On the one hand, Arab monaracies led by Saudi Arabia prioritized the ideological threat of political Islam, which led to confrontation with Turkish interests from Egypt to Libya and competition in Syria. On the other hand, the rise of Iran, particularly in the post-sanctions period, and the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood led to a strategic realignment of what has been called a “Sunni coalition” against “Shia hegemony” in the region.

As a result, the regional outlook has been largely lost, and the only priority for states turns out to be keeping the fire away from home while the region gets more and more entrenched in crises.

The picture in the Middle East is not promising at the moment. Atlı has drawn attention to two major elements that might make a difference in Middle Eastern geopolitics in the medium to longer term. One is related to the economic interdependence between actors, which goes on despite the conflict and violence. Economic ties between countries in the form of merchandise and services trade, transit of hydrocarbons, investments, and logistic networks can bring the countries closer to each other by creating links of mutual benefits that will be costly to break. Economically induced alliances will also play a vital role in the region once conflict and violence has ceased or reduced to more acceptable levels and the physical reconstruction of the war-torn areas commences.

The second item mentioned by Atlı was the role of China and Japan in this picture. People of the Middle East see East Asian powers to be interested in the
region for economic purposes, and the fact that these countries come without historical baggage can turn them into actors that play a constructive role for the future of the region.

There is the inevitable need to define a common good for the prospective regional order, which would set a normative base for comprehensive security and stability. However, leadership and hegemonic claims to set the defining elements of the regional order, rather than paving the way for common ground, have become the ulterior motive for the ongoing geostrategic rivalries.

It is important, as Nagara has carefully brought to attention, to be realistic when investigating the developments in the Middle East. There is not necessarily a universal moral lesson to be drawn from the Arab Spring experience as results differ from country to country. Progress is not linear and predictable; and the decline of a regime does not necessarily lead to the replacement of a better, more progressive order but, as Nagara stated, an alternative narrative that is constituent in addressing the challenges of the time.
A NON-WESTPHALIAN REGIONAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Political order in the Middle East since World War II has been shaped by the UN states system, which resurrected a Westphalia-inspired order that multiplied the number of states across the world and compelled those states not to transgress borders on behalf of co-religionists and other affiliates (namely, minorities) within the domains of other sovereigns. Yet today, the pursuit of inter-state relations and politics across the Middle East proceeds in exact contravention of the Westphalian dictum of “whose region, his religion” as sectarian affiliates and proxies extend state and communal influence and conduct military and other operations within the territories of rivals and their clients/allies.

This is why, as Aras emphasized, there is a need for a renegotiation of the Westphalian order. People of the region demand order, but the Westphalian order, which is a product of a specific history in Europe, is not deemed a good match for the Middle East. In Europe, state apparatuses created an order that is based on non-interventionism and secular principles. However, from the Middle Eastern perspective non-interventionism is simply not possible. When it comes to secularism this order does not offer any prospect as a building block either, since what is in question is a region that has been shaped through ethnic and sectarian ties that are transnational and transsocietal.

Moreover, as Tateyama has brought to attention, the European colonial powers transplanted the Westphalian system in the Middle East, and the majority of emerging independent states in this region have inherited a number of negative heritages and legacies from their respective colonial powers, such as borders and multiple identities within national territories. As a result, many states in this part of the world continuously suffer from legitimacy crises and are constantly in conflict with their own societies. In other words, there is entrenched conflict and mismatch between the Westphalian state system transplanted in the region and the indigenous social structure.

Amongst Middle Eastern actors, it appears that the rivalry is based on two models, namely authoritarian stability and liberal transformation. However, this liberal transformation approach is also descending the region into chaos. With the United States dramatically reducing its involvement and presence in the region, the dichotomy of being pro-Western and anti-Western has ceased to be a factor shaping the alliance system in the region. Instead, there is greater pragmatism and reliance on ad hoc coalitions.

Second, erosion of state authority in the Middle East not only undermines state order but also widens the scope of competition in the region by facilitating the emergence and proliferation of non-state actors. These non-state actors are not only gaining ground due to the failure of the nation-state, but they are also powered through the regional and international actors who recognize and cooperate with them. In the case of Syria, international actors such as the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are each opting for certain groups, many of which are non-state actors. The question of what this means for the future order is crucial. The Westphalian order has been fed by the international system, which reinforced nation-states to fight against terror. But here, in Syria, international actors prefer to go along with non-state actors in the hope that they will prevail in those geographies.

Third, there remains no basis for region-wide security. Regional security is thought to be largely based on territorial provisions of the state authorities; however, once the states have lost powers with regard to providing territorial security, the question of what kind of regional security there will be remains unanswered. Despite its challenges to the Westphalian order, there was a sense of Arab unity that had glued the region together, providing an element of uniformity. This has certainly disappeared as serious challenges have led to the dissolution of Arab unity. There is not one single issue that unites the Arabs these days, and even the Palestinian peace and negotiations with Israel can no longer unite the Arab nations.

Fourth, ideologies are becoming irrelevant in today’s Middle East. Ideologies referring to Islamism or Arab nationalism are irrelevant, while at the same time the liberal order is being weakened by authoritarian survival striking back.

According to Aras, new entities may emerge in the Middle East, although nothing can be taken for granted. Despite the bleak picture at the moment, elements of region-making are surfacing. Although
there will no longer be a united Middle East and North Africa, a smaller constellation is likely, and this will form the regional geography in relation to each other. At the end of the day, the emerging order will be neither Westphalian nor non-Westphalian but something in between the two.

As Tateyama underlined, it will be a long and difficult road for the Middle Eastern states, particularly those who have descended into chaos and violence such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, to restore a centralized governing system over their entire territories. With the ruling structure and mechanism almost completely destroyed in many areas, numerous local actors, which operate for their own agenda and interests, fill the void. The international community, for its part, should be more cautious about intervening in failed states with the purpose of restoring a centralized governing system. As many cases show, hasty approaches to state-building will certainly result in further instability. There must be special caution taken not to unilaterally impose liberal peace principles, such as election-based democratization and economic liberalization. Hasty imposition by external actors does not secure internal legitimacy and can further complicate the situation. In addition, it is quite clear that the international community does not have the patience and resources to continue to respond to the problems plaguing the Middle East for a long time. Instead of rushed attempts at political solutions, the international community should expand its humanitarian response as the unprecedented humanitarian crisis continues. According to Tateyama, the international community should support local actors more, because, as the Syrian case shows, local actors play an important role in assisting affected people at the grassroots level, but they suffer from a lack of funds, expertise, and experience.

Participants also elaborated on the question of exactly who is going to undertake the duties of region-making. At the moment, as IPC’s filed study reveals, no external actor is willing or capable of undertaking the burden of remaking the region. It requires regional ownership and a common ground among the regional actors to build an order. As participants agreed, there is still time to shape the MENA before it is too late, however, since leadership and hegemonic claims prevail at the moment.
In recent years, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of the Arabian Peninsula have gained prominence and influence across the Middle East, while major regional military powers such as Iraq and Egypt, and media and financial centers such as Lebanon, have been emasculated or marginalized. Cracks in the U.S. security guarantee and the fall of longstanding Arab presidents in the Arab Spring challenged the GCC, who responded with dramatic military interventions in the region.

The Arab uprisings have not really penetrated into Gulf countries, perhaps with the exception of Yemen and Bahrain. There has been some debate, especially among the younger age groups, on the need for more freedoms, for democracy, and for more civil rights in these monarchies. However, these debates were limited in every sense and failed to produce concrete outcomes. Still, Gulf countries played a crucial role in shaping the process, and they have become increasingly assertive in the region.

As Akpınar explained, there was briefly a “Gulf moment” in the region. As the Gulf monarchies became more prosperous economically, and had greater influence on the Middle Eastern region politically, regimes in the region observed the initial developments of the Arab Spring, analyzed the void that emerged as a result of the weakening of traditional leaders of the region and the disengagement of the United States, and saw a window of opportunity for themselves with respect to shaping the new Middle East. Once concerned only about regime survival, the monarchies of the Gulf embarked on a more active and ambitious policy towards the Middle East.

The euphoria was, however, short-lived. Declining oil prices, reduced surpluses, and increasing unemployment created significant bottlenecks for these countries, while the Yemen crisis served as a wake-up call to the limits of possible regional hegemony. In the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for hegemony over the Middle Eastern political sphere, Saudi Arabia was perceived to be losing ground in Yemen and giving way to Iranian influence. After the “loss” of Iraq to Iran, Yemen was considered to be a second loss in what has become a proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is based on the Sunni-Shia divide, which remains in the foreground of the discussions on the Gulf’s role during and after the Arab Spring. The increasing polarization that forms along the lines of this divide, together with secular-Islamist polarization, are considered as major threats, not only for the Gulf but also for the future of the entire Middle East.

There is an ensuing quest for regional power in the Middle East. While Saudi Arabia claims regional power, Qatar does so, too, as a result of changing policies during the Arab Spring. Meanwhile, Iran maintains its position, and Turkey emerges as an important player. For Tomba, Saudi Arabia has only one option and many issues. The only way to counter Iran is by creating a coalition and trying to keep a number of countries within this coalition. The way Saudis try to keep these coalitions together is by giving away money. Saudi Arabia seems to understand that they are weak at the moment and that they have to rely on Turkey to defend the Sunni interest. As Akpınar underlined, Arabs have a perception that Saudi Arabia would be the ideal, possible leader in the region; however, outside the Arab circle, there is a growing perception that Iran is the potential leader. Especially now with the nuclear deal and growing Iranian economy, Iran looks like a more possible candidate given Saudi Arabia’s inner strife and economic problems. Turkey has claimed to be a leader of Sunni groups and also it has strong institutions and state structure despite recent experiences such as the failed military coup of July 15th. Turkey still has a strong image in the Middle East as a potential leader, but it remains unknown how long it will take Turkey to solve its own domestic problems.

IPC’s field study confirms that Iran is considered as the ultimate winner of the Arab Spring in the Middle East. Gulf States have diverging policies with respect to radicalism and other pressing issues related to the Middle East. For instance, there is a common perception that the Assad regime in Syria needs to go; however, while some countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, propose military action to be taken against the Assad regime, others, such as the UAE, oppose intervention. A commonly perceived threat is the self-proclaimed Islamic State, or Daesh; and the Gulf countries are all against the partition of Syria. Additionally, divergences outweigh convergences when it comes to the Gulf monarchies’ approach to regional politics. Gulf countries are competing for diversification strategies for their economies, and mostly these countries are competing with each other as they are all in the same lines of business such as downstreaming petrochemicals, financial centers, free economic zones, tourism, and retail centers.
Tomba recognizes the divergences among the Gulf countries—and the fierce competition between them in several economic sectors—but also believes that at the end of the day security concerns keep them together, pulling the Gulf into a more active role. However, as all participants have agreed, the Gulf countries’ chosen method, i.e., relying on financial power to project influence and promote interests, appears to be problematic. One cannot always buy loyalty with money, and there is no guarantee that one will not run out of money, especially in resource-rich countries who failed to diversify their economies and therefore remain at the mercy of global prices. Moreover, using economic power abroad is a costly endeavor. As mentioned by Tomba, this is a major issue faced by Gulf governments. These regimes should maintain the social contract with their own people first and satisfy them economically before spending money abroad. Otherwise, the result is likely to escalate internal unrest and social instability.
This report has aimed to draw on the debates that were made during the conference in relation to the changing political geography in the Middle East six years after the initial outbreak of the Arab uprisings. As a product of an ongoing project, the conference and the resulting report compiled a number of crucial findings in this area.

To begin, Middle Eastern geopolitics has become increasingly fluid, and whatever exists there in the form of a regional order is currently in a destructive cycle of security dilemmas between actors, both internal and external to the region, without a definitive common good. Once based on the ultimate purpose of regime survival, and formed along longstanding wholesale and transgenerational loyalties, alliances in the Middle East are now partial, fluid, and contingent issue-based alliances, which are multilayered, intra-state, and inter-state, including not only states but also non-state actors, both established and newly appearing. The civil war in Syria has turned out to be the competition—and testing—ground for the newly formed alliances.

At a time when leadership and hegemonic claims to set the defining elements of the regional order, rather than paving the way for common ground, have become the ulterior motive for the ongoing geostrategic rivalries, there is an urgent need to define a common good for the prospective regional order, which would set a normative base for comprehensive security and stability. This can only be achieved by creating a new, realistic, and alternative narrative that is constituent in addressing the challenges of the time.

While alliances in the Middle East are shaped anew on slippery ground, a renegotiation of the Westphalian order is also necessary. The Westphalian order, with its emphasis on non-intervention and secularism, is a product of a specific history in Europe and is not deemed a good match for the indigenous social structure of the Middle East. What can replace the Westphalian system, and how, is an open question, but it seems clear by now that the emerging order will be neither Westphalian nor non-Westphalian, but something in between the two.

For a new order to be established, serious challenges will need to be overcome. Erosion of state authority, which undermines the state-led order, and in many cases the outright destruction of public structures and mechanisms, is perhaps the most crucial issue in this respect. State-building is a vital task; however, it is also important to keep in mind that hasty approaches throughout state-building will certainly result in further instability. In the meantime, there remains no basis for region-wide security in the Middle East. The sense of Arab unity that had glued the region together has dissolved, and it has not been replaced by an alternative commonality.

After a brief “Gulf moment” in the Middle East, wherein the Gulf monarchies made efforts to increase their influence over the region by utilizing financial and economic instruments, the euphoria now seems to be fading away. Declining oil prices, reduced surpluses, and increasing unemployment brought forward economic concerns for these countries’ policymakers, while the Yemen crisis and the Syrian civil war clearly showed the limits of influence. Moreover, the Gulf is not a monolithic bloc in any sense; divergences with respect to political and economic interests far outweigh the shared benefits. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry was a key parameter with respect to the Gulf’s role during and after the Arab Spring. But now, due to the Gulf’s limitations, including the sustainability problem of attempting to project power through economic instruments, many in the region see Iran as currently having the upper hand in this competition.

The Middle East is going through turbulent times, with many equations that have several variables requiring solutions. This report and the conference it is based on aimed to make a small yet meaningful contribution to the debate regarding the future of the region.