

The Underlying Dynamics of the Region's Challenges and the Path Forward

The Middle East and North Africa Region
Task Force Report

GIFGRF

GLOBAL İLİŞKİLER FORUMU · GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM

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MAY 2019

Global Relations Forum

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ISBN: 978-605-80796-3-2

Printed in Turkey.

Gren Agency, Istanbul. www.grenajans.com

Design and page layout:

Wodern Design&Software Agency. www.wodern.com

GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM

Yapı Kredi Plaza D Blok Levent 34330

Istanbul, Turkey

T: +90 212 339 71 51 F: +90 212 339 61 04

www.gif.org.tr | info@gif.org.tr

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at www.gif.org.tr.

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The Middle East and North Africa Region
Task Force Report

Co-Chairs

Hikmet Çetin, Yaşar Yakış

Task Force Directors

Ezgisu Biber (Until April 2017)

Selin Uğurtaş

GIFGRF

GLOBAL İLİŞKİLER FORUMU GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

The Task Force members below reached a consensus on the framework and overall conclusions of this report. The members participated in the Task force in their individual, not institutional, capacities. Thus, the opinions and views expressed in this Task Force Report do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions.



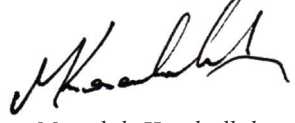
Bozkurt Aran



Mustafa Aydın



Hikmet Çetin



Memduh Karakullukçu



Ali Karaosmanoğlu



Sönmez Köksal



Ayşe Yüksel Mahfoud



Özdem Sanberk



Füsun Türkmen



Yaşar Yakış



Nigar Ağaogulları Yalınkılıç



Ezgisu Biber



Selin Uğurtaş

CONTENTS

PRESIDENT’S NOTE	ix
CHAIRS’ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xiii
GUEST SPEAKERS	xvii
I. Introduction	1
II. The Region-Wide Underpinnings of Instability	3
A. Political and Economic Factors	3
1. Structural Factors	3
2. Governance Failures	6
B. Identity-Based Factors	7
1. Ideology	7
2. Religion	10
3. Ethnic Nationalism	12
C. Factors Related to Environment and Geography	14
D. External Interference	18
III. The Country Dynamics Affecting Regional Stability	21
A. War-Torn Failed States: Syria and Yemen	21
B. The Rivalry Between Iran and Saudi Arabia	24
C. The Situation in Iraq	27
D. The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict	29
E. The Situation in Egypt	31
F. The Internal Conflicts of the GCC	33
G. Turkey	34
IV. The Way Forward: Policy Recommendations	37
A. Domestic Policies	38
B. Regional Policies	40
V. Conclusions	43
Bibliography	45
Annex I: A Chronology Of Contemporary Middle East Affairs	53
Task Force Members	59

PRESIDENT'S NOTE

The second decade of the 21st century started with a predictable but unexpected disruption of the tenuous equilibrium in the Middle East. What has transpired since then cannot yet be characterized as a new steady state. The conceptual challenge looking forward is whether a new equilibrium is within reach or a persistent disequilibrium will remain the dominant paradigm in the foreseeable future. Dynamics unfolding at three separate yet interlinked political layers will determine the future trajectory of the region.

At the global political layer, rivalry among big powers manifests itself in myriad ways in the region. However, these actors are reluctant warriors and miserly financiers which inevitably entices ruly and unruly, risk-averse and ambitious proxies to the scene. The intricate interplay between cost-conscious global players and the risk-return calculations of regional actors is likely to underpin and prolong the already haphazard and mostly adverse evolution of the Middle East. The persistence of this multi-actor entanglement and mutual testing of wills is likely to drag out the tenacious disequilibrium.

A possible shift in the approach of one or more global powers towards contributing more to security and development in the region, preferably in concert with each other, could conceivably tame the tempestuous oscillations of the region back to a tolerably settled new equilibrium. Regrettably, that scenario remains a remote prospect.

At the regional level, the widening spectrum of enticements and fears for local players adds a new layer of instability to political decision-making. Overzealous leaders may resort to more aggressive policies to broaden their spheres of influence. Risk-averse leaders, on the other hand, will likely perceive the cost of entanglement to be too high and refrain from taking an active role in contributing to peace and stability in trouble spots of the region. The costs and opportunities flowing from big power hesitation vis-à-vis the region will be overestimated by some and underestimated by others. Regional actors are unlikely to strike the golden ratio between constructive engagement and responsible non-meddling in the foreseeable future.

Last but not least, the people. After a decade of securitization of the political landscape and the destructive wars in Yemen, Syria and Libya, the baseline of public's immediate concerns and demands appear to have shifted from development to security across the region. Whether that shift implies more submissive and security-minded societies willing to accept oppressive regimes or simply a postponement of economic, political demands that will return with a vengeance in the coming years is difficult to predict.

In this report, the Task Force provides a multilayer analysis of the region-wide underpinnings of instability, including political, economic and identity based factors. The Task Force then turns to country dynamics affecting regional stability and presents a comprehensive study of the current and protracted conflicts in the region. Finally the report provides a set of domestic and regional policies that could constitute the first steps towards stabilization in the Middle East.

I would like to thank the distinguished Co-Chairs and esteemed members of the Task Force for sharing their invaluable insights and committing their precious time to produce this thought-provoking, thorough and balanced report. Although regional dynamics are constantly subject to change, the Task Force provides an accurate and detailed perspective on the “constants” of the Middle East by disentangling structural and historical determinants with a particular focus on the aftermath of the social upheavals in the region.

Task Force Co-Chairs Former Foreign Ministers Mr. Hikmet Çetin and Ambassador Yaşar Yakış have displayed an immeasurable level of commitment to this effort. Their expertise, dedication and intellectual determination gave birth to fruitful analyses and they gracefully navigated the Task Force's efforts throughout the entire process of drafting this report.

I am deeply grateful to Ambassador Özdem Sanberk and Ambassador Sönmez Köksal for offering their wise guidance, profound knowledge and refined assessments. I also extend my earnest appreciation to Ambassador Ertuğrul Apakan for so generously sharing with us his invaluable observations and insights during this lengthy process.

Finally, I would like to thankfully recognize the hard work and dedication of GRF Executive Director Mrs. Nigar Ağaoğulları Yalınkılıç and the inexhaustible commitment of the Task Force Directors Ms. Ezgisu Biber and Ms. Selin Uğurtaş.

At the dawn of the third decade of the 21st century, weaving the momentous yet idiosyncratic developments into a coherent narrative is of paramount significance if we are to maintain any hope of shaping that narrative to guide stability and prosperity in the Middle East.

In this light, I would like to thank once again the Task Force members for undertaking this overwhelming endeavor. I hope the hard work of the Task Force culminating in this report will contribute to and advance responsible policy thinking on the obstinately intractable challenges of the Middle East.

Memduh Karakullukçu

GRF Vice-Chairman & President

CHAIRS' ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is undergoing fundamental changes and there is little sign that it will stabilize soon. Any report about the MENA region is bound to become outdated within weeks or months. Despite this, Global Relations Forum (GRF) decided to draft a report that takes a glimpse into the continuously shifting landscape of the region, no matter how soon it may become obsolete.

The Task Force is composed of the best available experts in the field and co-chaired by the undersigned. Members include Ambassador (R) Sönmez Köksal, who served as Turkish Ambassador in Baghdad and as the Head of Turkey's Intelligence Service; Ambassador (R) Özdem Sanberk, the former Undersecretary of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Mr. Mustafa Aydın, the former President of Kadir Has University and Professor of International Relations; Mrs. Füsün Türkmen, Professor of International Relations at Galatasaray University; Ambassador (R) Bozkurt Aran, Turkey's Former Permanent Representative at the World Trade Organization; Mr. Ali Karaosmanoğlu, Professor of International Relations at Bilkent University, and Mrs. Ayşe Yüksel Mahfoud, Partner-in-Charge of the Istanbul Office of Norton Rose Fulbright and member of the firm's Global Executive Committee.

This report has two main objectives. One is to make available for Turkish decision-makers a text prepared with contributions from highly qualified experts: former officials who have served as ambassadors in various MENA capitals or in the Turkish Foreign Ministry's central administration, academics who have taught international relations at distinguished universities, as well as military strategists and prominent top level managers in the business world. The idea of drafting a report was inspired by the nonpartisan reports issued by various international think tanks. Unlike in the US, such institutions do not exist in Turkey and the reports drafted by nonpartisan teams are rarely heeded into account by the decision-makers. This contrast did not dissuade GRF from drafting the report.

The report's second aim is to provide foreign observers and analysts with a Turkish perspective on the developments in the MENA region. They, no doubt, have their own sources of information for assessing the situation in the region, but we trust that a Turkish perspective may help fill potential gaps in their assessments.

The report refers to some constants that contribute to the shaping of the evolution of the situation in the region. These constants do not always affect day-to-day events. Some remain deep in the background for a prolonged period, while others frequently come to the forefront.

What makes the region all the more volatile is the involvement of various foreign actors, almost all of whom have an interest in advancing their own agenda. Vagueness in the long-term goals of the US policy for the region makes it difficult for regional actors to make solid projections.

During the preparation of the report, GRF hosted several conferences, roundtable meetings, and panels. We would like specifically to thank the following individuals for their invaluable contributions: Mr. Staffan de Mistura, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria; David Gardner, International Affairs Editor of the Financial Times; Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Former Special Representative of the UK to Iraq; Emile Hokayem, IISS Senior Fellow for Middle East Security; Nasser Hadian-Jazy, Professor at the State University of Tehran; Ambassador (R) Rakesh Sood, Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of India for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Issues; Professor Steven E. Miller, Director of the International Security Program at Harvard University's Belfer Center; Dr. Nelly Lahoud, IISS Middle East Senior Fellow for Political Islamism; Anthony Bubalo, the Deputy Director of Research at the Lowy Institute; Cengiz Çandar, senior Turkish journalist and writer; Meliha Altunışık, Professor of International Relations at the Middle East Technical University; and Ambassador (R) Yaşar Yakış, former Turkish Foreign Minister.

Most of the views voiced during these panels and roundtable discussions have been incorporated into the report.

The Co-Chairs are extremely grateful to all those who made valuable contributions to this report, but they would like to specifically acknowledge several in particular. Ambassadors (R) Sönmez Köksal and Özdem Sanberk made an invaluable contribution to improve nearly every single sentence in the report. Ambassador (R) Ertuğrul Apakan frequently came to Istanbul all the way from Kyiv, where he serves as the Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, in order to provide his valuable input. Professor Mustafa Aydın edited the final text to ensure its overall consistency, improving the prose and replacing many expressions with more appropriate ones. Memduh Karakullukçu was the main pillar of the work throughout the exercise and brought his inexhaustible energy to every stage of the work.

Ezgisu Biber, who is now working in New York at the UN Security Council Secretariat, brilliantly compiled in the report all the views expressed at the working sessions during her post at GRF. Her contribution was indispensable for the completion of the report. The report could not have been finalized without the industrious and relentless efforts of Nigar Ağaoğulları Yalınkılıç, GRF's Executive Director, and the meticulous work of her colleague Selin Uğurtaş, Program Director at GRF, with her outstanding skill in synthesizing controversial ideas and in editing this report. Last but not least, the Co-Chairs would also like to thank Ata Mert Aladağ, Associate at GRF, for his efforts during the publication phase of the report. Without their valuable contributions this report would not have come into being.

The Co-Chairs hope that this report will contribute to a better understanding of the intricate issues of the MENA region among those who are interested in its past, present, and future.

TASK FORCE CO-CHAIRS

Yaşar Yakış

Ambassador (R)

Former Turkish Foreign Minister

Hikmet Çetin

Former Speaker of the Turkish Parliament

Former Turkish Foreign Minister

GUEST SPEAKERS

The list of guest speakers who shared their invaluable opinions with the Task Force members, along with the titles of their presentations, are as follows:

Prof. Meliha Altunışık

Professor of International Relations at Middle East Technical University
“Changing Regional Dynamics and Turkey’s Position in the Middle East”

Anthony Bubalo

Deputy Director and Director of Research at the Lowy Institute
“Emergence of ‘Middle Eastern Uprisings’ and the Future of the Region”

Cengiz Çandar

Journalist and Writer
“Collapse of the State System in the Middle East: Readjustment of the Regional Balance of Power”

Staffan de Mistura

UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy to Syria
“A Panoramic Picture of the Syrian Conflict and Possible Opportunities for Resolution”

David Gardner

Financial Times International Affairs Editor
“Sources of Instability and the Path to Resilient State Structures in the Middle East”

Sir Jeremy Greenstock

Former Special Representative of the UK to Iraq
“Drivers of Uncertainty and Ways to Promote Growth and Stability in the Middle East”

Prof. Nasser Hadian-Jazy

Professor at the University of Tehran
Panel Session: “Iran, the Nuclear Agenda, and the Region’s Future”

Emile Hokayem

IISS Senior Fellow for Middle East Security
“Middle East Disorder and External Powers: Between Containment and Opportunity”

Dr. Nelly Lahoud

IISS Middle East Senior Fellow for Political Islamism
“The ‘Islamic State’: Between Terrorism and State-Building”

Prof. Steven E. Miller

Director of the International Security Program at Harvard University Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and Chair of the Pugwash Executive Committee
Panel Session: *“Iran, the Nuclear Agenda, and the Region’s Future”*

Amb. Rakesh Sood

Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of India (SEPM) for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Issues and Former Ambassador of India to Afghanistan, Nepal, and France
Panel Session: *“Iran, the Nuclear Agenda, and the Region’s Future”*

Amb. Yaşar Yakış

Minister of Foreign Affairs (F) and Ambassador
“Turkey’s Relations with the Middle East and a Historical Overview of Political Developments in the Region”

I. INTRODUCTION

Initially dubbed the “Arab Spring,” a series of popular uprisings began in Tunisia towards the end of 2010 and spread over the Middle East and North Africa, bringing along a glimmer of hope for democracy and progress. As protests gained momentum, there were calls across the region for the removal of the oppressive regimes and their leaders, coming from voices previously unheard.

Widespread and increasingly popular as they were, the protests were not accompanied by a game plan to replace the people and institutions that they aimed to depose. While the masses had a clear idea of what they did not want, their alternative utopias lacked unity, leaders, cadres, and structures.¹ In the absence of alternatives – coupled with violent government crackdowns in some cases – democratic protests were soon followed by conflict, instability, violent extremism, and a new wave of autocracy.²

As this promising yet brief intermission to authoritarianism, initiated by what could be more accurately called the “Arab Uprisings,” has come to an end, the region suffers from new and protracted conflicts, terrorism, a severe refugee crisis, interstate tensions, and humanitarian catastrophes including famine and cholera. Moreover, the destabilizing effects of the protests continue to spread beyond the region, creating major security risks and causing disputes between states concerned about how to address them.

Two concurrent forces play a major role in creating and perpetuating instability in the region. The first of these, the region-wide underpinnings of instability, concerns system-level factors that affect the countries of the region to varying extents and play a significant part in the region’s overall stability. The second force, country dynamics that affect regional stability, concerns state-level behaviors and/or interactions with potential or actual regional consequences.³

¹ Bekir Ağırdir, “Küresel ara buzul dönem,” t24.com.tr, April 19, 2018. <http://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/bekir-agirdir/kuresel-ara-buzul-donem,19523>

² James M. Dorsey, “The Post-2011 Arab World: Change is the Name of the Game,” *Mobilizing Ideas*, March 01, 2017. <https://mobilizingideas.wordpress.com/2017/03/01/the-post-2011-arab-world-change-is-the-name-of-the-game/>

³ Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States, 2nd Edition* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 335.

Starting with the assumption that an in-depth analysis of these forces will contribute to the understanding of the underlying reasons for the region's troubles, the Task Force report will initially elaborate on the factors making up each force. Based on an assessment of the effects and interactions of these factors, it will then suggest a policy path for leading the region towards peace, stability, and development.

II. THE REGION-WIDE UNDERPINNINGS OF INSTABILITY

A. Political and Economic Factors

1. Structural Factors

Structural socio-economic challenges, coupled with the lack of effective policies to address them, are some of the primary sources of discontent and instability in the Middle East. Particularly in the Arab countries of the region, fast-growing youth populations, small industrial sectors, and low levels of productivity hamper economic development.⁴

On the workforce side of the issue, the region's growing youth population has increasingly higher levels of education and connectivity, yet the rise in their numbers and qualifications is not matched with that of employment opportunities. According to a medium-fertility scenario prepared by the United Nations, the population of MENA countries is expected to reach around 600 million in 2050, up from 350 million in 2016.⁵ Coupled with a youth bulge between the ages of 15 and 24,⁶ the existing pressures to create new employment opportunities in the Arab world are set to increase dramatically, and are expected to be multiplied by a scarcity in resources caused by the effects of climate change.⁷ Hence, while the youth population has the potential to become the "backbone of strong economies and a vibrant future,"⁸ high levels of unemployment, lack of opportunities, and the exclusionary nature of political and economic structures prevent most regional countries from taking advantage of the dynamism of their societies.

The surge in population could also emerge as a threat to social stability in the Levant, as birth rates vary amongst diverse minority

⁴ Jon B. Alterman, "When the Middle East Seemed Stable," *The Atlantic*, January 05, 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/middle-east-trump-arab-spring/512315/?utm_source=CSIS+All&utm_campaign=0198c9595c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_01_06&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f326fc46b6-0198c9595c-150551397

⁵ United Nations Development Programme, "Arab Human Development Report 2016," report, 2016. <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbas/report/AHDR%20Reports/AHDR%202016/AHDR%20Final%202016/AHDR2016En.pdf>

⁶ The youth unemployment rate in the Middle East is the highest in the world at around 25 per cent, compared to the global average of 13 per cent: International Labour Organization, "Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015: MENA region retains highest youth unemployment rate in the world," October 08, 2015. https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_412797/lang-en/index.htm

⁷ Özlem Tür, "Challenges of Demographic Pressures and Resource Scarcity on the Political Economy in the Levant & MENA Region," in *The Levant; Search for a Regional Order* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018).

⁸ Ibid.

groups that co-exist in a delicate balance. This so-called “differential fertility” complicates political and social dynamics in the region. When accompanied by political stagnation and lack of representation, such differential changes in the population deepen the fragility of a state, rendering its social and political climate conducive to the emergence of new radical movements and intra-state violence.⁹

A second important challenge is women’s severe lack of access to economic opportunities across the region, which emerges as a major setback not only to the female population but also to regional economic output. Currently, women’s participation in the economy in MENA countries is the lowest in the world, and at its current pace, catching up with the world average is not likely to happen in the near future.¹⁰ This is detrimental for economic growth. The IMF suggested the region could have doubled its GDP if it succeeded in significantly narrowing the gap, while a McKinsey report projected that regional GDP would increase by 11 per cent if all countries in the region diminished the gender gap to the same extent as their best-improving neighbors.¹¹ Gender-based violence is another issue that creates a significant economic cost. For instance, it is estimated in 2015 to cost around 123 million USD per year in Egypt, incurred through the provision of services for victims and productivity losses.¹²

Turning to industry, it is important to note that in many economies, the public sector has dominance in the job market, which leaves limited room for the private sector and therefore creates distortions in the system. This dominance is reflected in, and perpetuated by, the focus of education systems on public sector employment. In oil-rich economies such as Kuwait, Libya, and Saudi Arabia, there is also a heavy dependence on oil production, followed by the services sector. Manufacturing is very

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gayle Tzemach Lemmon and Alyssa Dougherty, “Improving Women’s Economic Participation in MENA Nations,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 27, 2017. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/improving-womens-economic-participation-mena-nations>; According to a World Bank figure, only 25 per cent of women living in the region are employed or looking for work: Bessma Momani, “Equality and the Economy: Why the Arab World Should Employ More Women,” policy briefing, Brookings Doha Center, December 2016. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/bdc_20161207_equality_in_me_en.pdf

¹¹ For the IMF report, see: Ratna Sahay and Martin Cihak, “Women in Finance: A Case for Closing Gaps,” staff discussion note no. 18/05, International Monetary Fund, September 17, 2018. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Staff-Discussion-Notes/Issues/2018/09/17/women-in-finance-a-case-for-closing-gaps-45136>. For the McKinsey Global Institute report, see: Jonathan Woetzel et al, *How advancing women’s equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth*, report, McKinsey Global Institute, September 2015. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>

¹² Heba Kanso, “Violence against women hurts Arab economies, U.N. says,” *Reuters*, October 04, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-economy-women/violence-against-women-hurts-arab-economies-u-n-says-idUSKBN1C92M7>; Samar Kadi, “Alarming rise of violence against women in Arab region,” *The Arab Weekly*, January 08, 2017. <https://theabweekly.com/alarming-rise-violence-against-women-arab-region>

limited, and diversification is mostly confined to traditional sectors. In this context, there is a high vulnerability toward the recent years' downward trend in oil prices.

Another significant structural factor is related to intra-regional remittances. While the Middle East is one of the least economically integrated regions of the world, it has an important volume of remittances due to migration flows.¹³ As oil-based economies need to import labor for sectors such as construction, education, and services, economies with higher ratios of youth population seek in turn to mitigate unemployment by exporting it. As dependencies in an economy often do, the reliance on remittances constitutes a vulnerability as well as a potential source of instability for countries such as Egypt, which has long been a major source of labor for Saudi Arabia. In the future, Egypt may face the consequences of a decreasing demand from the Kingdom for economic migrants.¹⁴

The economic desperation that had led Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor, to spark a revolution in 2010 by setting himself on fire is still widely present in the region; most people still lack access to economic opportunities. It can be argued that this was the very same desperation that enabled Bashar al-Assad to hold onto power in Syria amid a popular revolution. In Syria's urban centers, where state agencies continued to function and the government ensured some degree of order and normalcy, most people extended their support to the president out of fear of the chaos and insecurity that would prevail after his removal from power.¹⁵ If these structural factors are not addressed through good governance, it is reasonable to expect more instability in the region, either through new uprisings and reactionary movements, or a revived appeal of violent non-state actors that promise sustained employment and income. The current rate of unemployment of highly educated youth, as well as the lack of political engagement through formal channels despite severe dissatisfaction, might easily harbor new rebellions in the future.¹⁶ However, through a fairer distribution of opportunity and further diversification of economies, economic resentments could easily be prevented from triggering such instability.

¹³ Nemat Shafik, *Has labor migration promoted economic integration in the Middle East?*, working paper, vol. 1, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1992). <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/136081468756611243/Has-labor-migration-promoted-economic-integration-in-the-Middle-East>

¹⁴ David Schenker and Simon Henderson, "Paradoxes of Egyptian-Saudi Relations," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, The Washington Institute, December 2009. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opedcs/4b1e9a6395bc6.pdf>

¹⁵ Barak Barfi, "In Aleppo, I Saw Why Assad is Winning," *Politico*, December 02, 2016. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/aleppo-syria-assad-214494>

¹⁶ United Nations Development Programme. *Arab Human Development Report 2016: Enabling Youth to Shape Their Own Future Key to Progress on Development and Stability in the Region*, news release, November 29, 2016. <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2016/11/29/arab-human-development-report-2016-enabling-youth-to-shape-their-own-future-key-to-progress-on-development-and-stability-in-arab-region-.html>

2. Governance Failures

As central as the socio-economic factors described in the previous chapter are to grievances, unrest, and instability in the region, their powerful impact is mostly due to their close link to governance failures. While some of these factors, such as lack of opportunities for women and youth, can be blamed on inadequate policies, others, such as vulnerability to fluctuations in oil prices, are more structural, independent variables that need to be addressed through good governance. Hence, both cases indicate governments are failing to meet an expectation that they satisfy the basic needs of their citizens.

Poor governance as manifested by the governments' failures in the fair, equal, and uninterrupted provision of education, healthcare, basic services, and economic opportunities is one of the main underpinnings of instability in the region.¹⁷ Furthermore, these failures in service delivery are reinforced by autocratic rule marred by corruption, which was a major source of discontent in the region leading up to the Arab Uprisings.¹⁸ The authoritarian leaders of the region, such as Muammar Gadhafi of Libya, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, and Bashar al-Assad of Syria, prioritized the safety of their positions over the needs of their citizens, favoring some segments of their societies at the expense of others – based on their sectarian affiliations, family ties, clientelism, etc. At the same time, they created aggrieved masses who lacked access not only to services, but also to peaceful and democratic channels for challenging or even questioning their government's policies. Hence, a crisis of legitimacy came to dominate the region.¹⁹

Over the course of the Arab Uprisings, protesters filled the streets to demand better governance to improve their social and economic conditions, but they fell short of presenting alternative systems and leaders. Consequently, the limited political opening that was achieved was either used by hardline Islamist parties or turned into power and security vacuums that were exploited by non-state actors. With the exception of the relative success of Tunisia, the democratic gains in the region have been reversed and governance failures under authoritarian regimes persist. If not addressed in a comprehensive and inclusive manner, these failures are bound to cause further instability in the region.

¹⁷ Jeremy Greenstock, "It's time to think big about solving the crisis in Syria," *The Standard*, June 03, 2013. <https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/jeremy-greenstock-it-s-time-to-think-big-about-solving-the-crisis-in-syria-8642094.html>

¹⁸ "Middle-class Frustration Fueled the Arab Spring," The World Bank, October 21, 2015. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/10/21/middle-class-frustration-that-fueled-the-arab-spring>

¹⁹ "What is the Arabic for Democracy?," *The Economist*, May 12, 2016. <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21698436-endless-obstacles-political-freedom-remain-what-arabic-democracy>

In the current regional context of extreme fragmentation along multiple lines, authoritarian tendencies are perpetuated by the fear that loosening the grip on power could result in a complete takeover by the “others,” whichever alternative ideology, ethnicity, or sect they may represent. Unyielding authoritarianism can be remedied through political freedom, plurality, and representation; if political actors believe that they are capable of obtaining representation through democratic means, it will reduce their incentive to pour resources into maintaining oppressive rules. In addition, democratization will bring greater accountability, which will pave the way for better governance.

B. Identity-Based Factors

1. Ideology

In the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, extremist ideologies emerged as a significant driving force in the Middle East and came to shape the domestic developments and foreign policies of countries in the region. This era – characterized by the weakening of the state structures that were designed after the First World War – paved the way for the rise of non-state actors. For decades prior to 2003, in general, these states had been ruled by exclusivist autocratic regimes that repressed all dissent, marginalized some groups, and blocked all peaceful channels for expressing grievances. This created a breeding ground for extremism in the long-run. While the feeling of political exclusion, as well as the absence of economic opportunities, provided fertile soil for the extremist ideologies that emerged in the coming decades, the evolution of extremism into its current form was closely linked to its merging with anti-Western ideology, which predated it.

The anti-imperialist sentiment that dominated the eastern camp throughout the Cold War found its reflection in the Middle East as resentment over the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Although the extent to which the agreement actually determined the borders is disputed, it was often criticized for having drawn artificial lines in a region where numerous peoples of different ethnicities and religions had been living side by side. Then, as globalization gained speed, a counterforce to it emerged in the region in the form of the polarization of identities, which was based on disillusionment with existing mainstream values and identities, most prominently those favorable to the West.²⁰

²⁰ Jeremy Greenstock, “Syria - what comes next?” *UNA-UK Magazine*, October 22, 2013. <https://www.una.org.uk/magazine/autumn-2013/una-uk-chairman-sir-jeremy-greenstock-syria-what-comes-next>

In addition to the support that Western countries provided to “friendly dictators” over the years, the developments triggered by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were another factor that deepened this resentment. US backing of the mujahedeen against Moscow, as well as the geopolitical implications of the Soviet Union’s collapse, served as catalysts to the rise of jihadist ideology. The NATO-backed US intervention in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq by the US that followed 9/11 deepened this anger, which evolved into strong anti-Western sentiment.

This anti-Western ideology resonated with the unemployed, aggrieved masses, and continued to gain ground. As the Arab Uprisings fell short of creating credible alternatives to the existing rulers and systems, the gains made in democracy and participation were soon reversed, and a vacuum was left for extremism to fill.²¹ Jihadist groups like the Islamic State (IS) were then able to take advantage of both the state-society relationship ruptured by authoritarian regimes and the growing dislike for Western countries and their value systems.²²

Following the invasion of Iraq, the premeditated destruction of the Iraqi state structure and the dismantling of its security forces initiated a sequence of events that not only alienated the country’s Sunni population but also, by creating chaos, provided a breeding ground for the rise of armed extremist movements.²³ To begin with, this resulted in the strengthening of jihadist groups to the extent that the Islamic State, once an Al-Qaeda offshoot in Iraq, was able to establish a self-declared caliphate with its own army, police, law, state institutions, and revenue collection system, and at its peak in early 2015, had 10 million people living in the geography it controlled. The organization captured an immense territory stretching from Iraq to Syria, and carried out countless atrocities in the region and beyond, through local recruits as well as foreign fighters. Although the group has recently lost control of its territory, it nevertheless remains capable of planning or inspiring terrorist attacks around the globe, through individuals or cellular structures.

Secondly, the rise of extremist ideologies opened a sphere of influence for foreign involvement, which, as explained in further detail under the section on external interference, is often a factor that exacerbates

²¹ James M. Dorsey, “The Post-2011 Arab World: Change is the Name of the Game,” *Mobilizing Ideas*, March 01, 2017. <https://mobilizingideas.wordpress.com/2017/03/01/the-post-2011-arab-world-change-is-the-name-of-the-game/>

²² Fawaz A. Gerges. *ISIS: A History*. Princeton, (NJ): Princeton University Press, 2017), 22.

²³ Kenneth M. Pollack, “The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq,” Brookings Institute Saban Center, July 2013. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Pollack_Iraq.pdf

instabilities.²⁴ Due to the spread of jihadi terrorist attacks across the globe and the phenomenon of foreign fighters, the extremist ideology was perceived as a major, direct security threat by many countries including the United States, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, France, and others. Even when there was a common objective, such as that of fighting terrorism in the case of Syria, the methods and priorities of these nations often diverged. For Syria, this led to heightened tensions and affected the dynamics of the conflict.

Another destabilizing effect emanating from extremist ideologies and actions was the strengthening of militia groups. For example, in Iraq, as a result of the security vacuum and with the help of Iran, Shi'ite militia groups became prominent actors in the fight against the Islamic State. Considering their strength, resources, and political as well as religious divergence from the Iraqi state, addressing the militia problem in post-IS Iraq will be a significant challenge.²⁵

As for Syria, numerous non-state militia groups remain operational inside the country, amidst the security vacuum resulting from the ongoing conflict. While most anti-government militia groups have emerged from rural Sunni Arab villages, these have failed to coalesce around interests and ideologies, despite the efforts of external actors that oppose the current regime.²⁶ On the other hand, there are various non-state, foreign-linked, ideologically driven militia groups fighting on behalf of the Syrian government as well. These groups emerged partly as a result of Iran's broader efforts to mobilize Shi'ite Muslims in neighboring countries in order to advance its political and ideological interests.²⁷ As such, Iran and Hezbollah provided support for the Assad government by organizing Shi'ite militias in Syria and intimidating anti-Assad activists in Lebanon. They have also facilitated the establishment and training of significant militia groups such as the Jaysh al-Sha'bi.²⁸

Although jihadi extremism as represented by the Islamic State currently appears to be in decline, the lessons of the past caution against declaring a premature victory in the face of extremist ideologies. One plausible scenario for the future would be intensified radicalization

²⁴ Hayder Al-Khoei, *Syria, Iraq and the Struggle for Power*, research paper, Chatham House, November 24, 2016. <https://reader.chathamhouse.org/syria-iraq-and-struggle-power-intertwined-futures#>

²⁵ Ranj Alaaldin, "How to resolve Iraq's Shiite militia problem," *Brookings Blog*, October 28, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/10/28/how-to-resolve-iraqs-shiite-militia-problem/>

²⁶ Aron Lund, *The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria*, report, CTC Sentinel, August 2013. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-non-state-militant-landscape-in-syria>

²⁷ Kheder Khaddour, "Syria's Troublesome Militias," Carnegie Middle East Center, November 05, 2018. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77635>

²⁸ "Iran and Hezbollah build militia networks in Syria, officials say." *The Guardian*, February 12, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/12/iran-hezbollah-milita-networks-syria>

amongst extremist groups, which would result in their spread across the globe to form smaller, more extreme groups that would be even more difficult to locate and defeat.²⁹ Another scenario would involve a destructive competition inside and/or amongst extremist organizations, which would divide and weaken them as was initially the case after the split of the Islamic State (then Al-Qaeda in Iraq), but, once again, fall short of ensuring their full elimination.³⁰ On the other hand, it is possible that the Assad government's ongoing attempts to integrate irregular forces into formal state structures may further complicate post-conflict efforts to "Disarm, Demobilize, and Rehabilitate" (DDR) militia groups.³¹ Finding a long-term solution to the instabilities caused by extremist ideologies lies in addressing the root causes of the ease with which radical organizations recruit, as well as concerted regional and international efforts.

2. Religion

The issue of religion lies at the heart of two fault lines in the region that continue to stir up instability. The first of these points to the divide between secularism and Islam, which has become an increasingly important feature since the Arab Uprisings.³² The democratic challenge that the uprisings brought against secular, authoritarian systems created an opportunity for representation for the Islamist parties that had previously been banned from the political sphere. Their electoral victories in Egypt and Tunisia signaled, counter to expectations, that the democratic openings would not lead to more inclusive and progressive governments. Furthermore, to the dismay of regional powers supportive of Egypt's nascent democracy, the military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government of Egypt did not receive the expected condemnation from the West.

Political Islam continues to be a contentious and divisive issue in the region. While the Muslim Brotherhood maintains its influence in several countries, it does so through either the provision of services (Egypt and Jordan) or ideological appeal based on reactions to reforms that seek

²⁹ William McCants, "After the fall of ISIS, what's next for counterterrorism? Experts discuss," *Brookings Blog*, October 03, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/10/03/after-the-fall-of-isis-whats-next-for-counterterrorism-experts-discuss/>

³⁰ Clint Watts, "Deciphering Competition Between al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State," *CTCSentinel*, Vol. 9, No. 7, July 2016. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/deciphering-competition-between-al-qaida-and-the-islamic-state>

³¹ Kheder Khaddour, "Syria's Troublesome Militias," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, November 05, 2018. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77635>

³² Emile Hokayem, "Assad Or We Burn the Country": *Misreading Secterianism and the Regime in Syria*, commentary, *War on the Rocks*, August 24, 2016. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/assad-or-we-burn-the-country-misreading-sectarianism-and-the-regime-in-syria/>

modernization and the promotion of moderate Islam (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates' perception of a threat in Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and the resulting ostracism of Qatar from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), demonstrates the extent to which political Islam can alter regional balances and stability. Since the uprisings, the region has also witnessed the politicization of Salafism; important Salafist movements entered politics out of fear of being marginalized in the religious sphere if the Muslim Brotherhood ended up dominating the political and religious domains. The rivalry between the Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood, which was the reason behind the support of the Salafists for the coup in Egypt as well as their involvement in fighting against the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, adds another layer of complexity to the fault line concerning political Islam.

Another religious fault line that continues to shape domestic as well as regional dynamics is sectarianism. Although Sunni and Shi'ite identities had long been part of regional realities, sectarianism became a determinant of regional stability only after Iran gained the ability to increase the strength and reach of its Shi'ite political ideology. This happened as a result of the 1979 revolution, the 2001 war in Afghanistan, and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.³³

As explained in further detail under the chapter on Iran-Saudi Arabia relations, these two countries have provided support to various governments as well as non-governmental entities to win their fight for regional supremacy, especially since the start of the Arab Uprisings. Their leaders seized on the sectarian power imbalances touched off by the uprisings, as a result of which sectarianism poisoned the uprisings and their aftermath and replaced nationalism as a driving force.³⁴ Currently, sectarianism lies at the heart of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, as well as the volatility and the rise of militias in Iraq. Unless a significant shift occurs in the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it appears that the developments in the region will continue to be perceived and addressed through a sectarian lens.

It seems difficult for religion to cease being a fault line or become a source of unity and stability in the Middle East region. Nevertheless, if greater religious pluralism and tolerance is achieved, religion can perhaps be saved from the convolutions of politics and conflict.

³³ Alex Henly, "How Sectarian Conflicts Overtook the Arab Spring," Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, 2016, 8-9.

³⁴ David Gardner, "Autocracy is the cause, not the cure, of the Middle East's ills," *Financial Times*, May 05, 2015. <https://www.ft.com/content/88625538-f27c-11e4-892a-00144feab7de>

3. Ethnic Nationalism

When discussing ethnic nationalism in the region, the striking differences among Middle Eastern countries must be taken into account. The Middle East is far from being a monolith. First of all, it would be a misleading oversimplification to put non-Arab countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Israel in the same basket as the Arab countries. Secondly, it should be noted that Arab countries – despite speaking Arabic and being members of the Arab League – have very few common features. Their historical backgrounds are different, their experiences with democracy are different, and their societal evolutions as well as their colonial experiences were almost entirely distinct. During recent history, they preferred to join competing political blocs. They have waged wars against each other, such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and in some cases – such as the confrontation between Qatar and the Saudi-led group – they perceive one another as archenemies. For these reasons, it is essential to adopt a cautious approach when discussing Middle Eastern countries in general or Arab countries in particular.

Among Arab countries, the roots of pan-Arab nationalism can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century. However, its organization into political movements did not occur until the beginning of the 20th century, ahead of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire that had kept people of various ethnicities under the banner of a caliphate for several centuries. Nationalism was then used, to varying degrees of success, as a uniting force in the newly established states of the region. The success of pan-Arab nationalism as an ideology reached its peak upon the establishment of the short-lived United Arab Republic with the union of Egypt and Syria. The sense of Arab nationalism was also strengthened by the Arab-Israeli wars, until the defeat against Israel in the 1967 War. While the rise of Arab nationalism was closely linked to the policies of one leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, its fall was related to those of another, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, who, through his Ba'athist ideology, prioritized regional power and dominance over cooperation with other predominantly Arab states.³⁵ The “open door policy” of Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat was aimed at normalizing relations with Israel, and while it signaled a shift in the importance of pan-Arabism, it was Hussein's invasion of Kuwait that terminated it.

The ideological collapse of pan-Arab nationalism, which was a secular and regional ideology, left governments hollow and without an organic bond to foster a sense of unity among Arab peoples within and across

³⁵ Fouad Ajami, “The End of Arab Nationalism,” *The New Republic*, July 12, 1991. <https://newrepublic.com/article/91635/the-end-arab-nationalism>

countries. Nationhood, as a secular substitute to the caliphate system, was not a driving force with the adequate strength to keep states intact.³⁶ While attempting to forge and maintain nation-states, Iraq and Syria turned into totalitarian regimes, which, as previously discussed, planted the seeds of the grievances that sparked the uprisings in 2011.

In other words, in the case of ethnic nationalism, it is the lack of shared national narratives and values, combined with the persistent influence of tribalism that has led to instability.³⁷ The initial appeal of the Islamic State and its self-declared caliphate for thousands of people across the globe shows how the vacuum of identity and belonging was filled by extremist ideologies in the absence of a strong sense of nationhood.

In contrast, the existence of a sizable population of Kurds in the Middle East, spread across Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, each forming sizable percentages within their countries, is a reality of the region.³⁸ They have demands ranging from the recognition of their cultural rights to regional autonomy and even independence. Nevertheless, like the Arabs, they are also not a monolithic entity, as different dialects and sectarian or tribal loyalties shape their identities, while some have attained a degree of cultural assimilation after residing in urban centers for extended periods. Despite these internal disparities and divisions, some Kurdish groups and organizations have benefitted from the turmoil and instability that started with the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Iraqi Kurds were already enjoying a form of autonomy since an international no-fly zone was established over northern Iraq in 1991. After partnering with the US in ousting Saddam Hussein, they also managed to emerge as a decisive actor in drafting the country's new constitution. The 2005 constitution recognized the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a semi-autonomous region, in exchange for its acknowledgement of Iraq as a unitary state.³⁹ This, however, did not stop the KRG from holding an independence referendum in 2017 – which was considered a failed bid from the outset, in the face of objections from Baghdad, as well as the international community. The unanimous reaction of the international community has demonstrated that steps in violation of Iraq's constitution are unacceptable.

³⁶ David Gardner, "Autocracy is the cause, not the cure, of the Middle East's ills," *Financial Times*, May 05, 2015. <https://www.ft.com/content/88625538-f27c-11e4-892a-00144feab7de>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *The Time of the Kurds Interactive Map*, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/time-kurds#/time-kurds>

³⁹ Katy Collin, "The Kurdish referendum won't deliver independence—here's why it matters anyway," *Brookings Blog*, September 19, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/09/19/the-kurdish-referendum-wont-deliver-independence-heres-why-it-matters-anyway/>

Recently, Syrian Kurdish efforts to form a homogeneous, contiguous zone along the Turkish border with Northern Syria – by resorting even to exchanges of Kurdish and non-Kurdish populations – prompted Ankara to launch cross-border military operations to prevent such developments. During the Syrian War, the Syrian Kurds emerged as an important regional actor by aligning with the US and playing a role in defeating the Islamic State. Even though the Kurdish Democratic Union/People's Protection Units (PYD/YPG) is known to have links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – which has been orchestrating terror attacks against Turkey since 1984 – it nonetheless succeeded in expanding its territorial holdings mainly to the east of the Euphrates River, with the help of direct military and material support from the US. If this situation persists, it risks triggering unpredictable consequences and undermining the stability of the entire region. Deciphering Trump's policies on the "Kurdish issue" towards Syria, Iraq, and Iran, has become crucial for the countries involved.

Overall, nationalism is often divisive and mostly weak in the region. The potential contribution of the notion of a transboundary "Arab nation" to stability in the Middle East and North Africa is still questionable. The League of Arab States, which was created as a mostly inactive, loose confederation of Arabic-speaking states, was only able to achieve limited success given the absence of a shared destiny and values, as well as diverging geostrategic interests.⁴⁰ Recently, the League was able to collectively agree on supporting a no-fly zone in Libya, and on setting up a fact-finding mission to monitor the conflict in Syria. Nevertheless, the organization is unlikely to assume more responsibility in contributing to regional stability, since its founding charter lacks an instrument to oblige its members to abide by its resolutions. Following the example of the African Union, only if the organization acts in unison despite members' disparate postures, and is strengthened to take greater ownership of regional developments, will it potentially contribute to the creation of a more cooperative environment in the region.

C. Factors Related to Environment and Geography

Even prior to the emerging shift from oil scarcity towards oil abundance, the dependence of Middle Eastern economies on natural resources has been a source of vulnerability and concern. Due to frequent fluctuations in oil prices, the so-called "black gold" has been regarded as an unstable source of income. Moreover, being a capital-intensive industry, oil does not create an adequate amount of jobs and results in societies with high

⁴⁰ Jonathan Masters and Mohammed A. Sergie, "The Arab League," Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 2014. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/arab-league>

rates of unemployment. Oil-dependent economies are also more likely to be authoritarian, are more prone to civil wars, and display less economic stability and growth – a phenomenon dubbed the “oil curse.”⁴¹ While these factors give grounds for diversifying regional economies, the issue has mostly been postponed or neglected, as its direct impact on the ruling elite is limited. This situation is bound to change, as the ongoing transition towards an “age of plenty” in the oil industry threatens the internal stability of oil-rich economies, increasing the urgency of the problem for the governing elite.⁴²

The US shale revolution, combined with the rise of renewables and increased energy efficiency, dramatically changed the geography and future of the oil industry. The US is set to emerge as the largest oil producer in 2019, and, by 2025, its oil production is expected to equal that of Russia and Saudi Arabia combined. According to estimates, the country will also become the top gas producer in the next five years, and its LNG production will catch up with that of Qatar by 2023, at the latest.⁴³ While developments related to shale and renewables imply a boost on the supply side, increased efficiency denotes a decline in consumption. Coupled together, these factors will undoubtedly put a strain on regional economies, as they will not only have to export less, but also at a lower price.

This new landscape is bound to have dire implications for oil-based economies, in terms of not only their income, but also the extent of their global influence. It ought to be underlined that the transformation of the US into a self-sufficient major energy producer is most likely to have a direct impact on its Middle East policy. A no-longer-oil-dependent US will be much more reluctant to intervene in the region, which, in turn, might have a long-term impact on the geopolitical balance. It can be speculated that the US focus on the region may weaken, whereas China, now the world’s largest energy consumer, can be expected to increase its regional involvement.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press & Oxford University Press, October 19, 2011), 5. https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/ross/oilcurse/oil_curse_chapter_1.pdf

⁴² Nick Butler, “Winners and losers in the age of energy abundance,” *Financial Times*, February 26, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/06a8df16-1548-11e8-9376-4a6390addb44>

⁴³ Carla Sertin, “IEA: US oil production will equal Saudi Arabia and Russia’s combined output by 2025,” *Oil and Gas Middle East*, December 26, 2018. <https://www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com/drilling-production/33221-iea-us-oil-production-will-equal-saudi-arabia-and-russias-combined-output-by-2025>

⁴⁴ China is a major consumer with inadequate natural resources within its territories. To reduce its external dependence, it has invested heavily in alternative forms of energy, such as renewables and nuclear, while also working towards improving energy efficiency. Nonetheless, it imports a large volume of oil from both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and might assume a more influential role in regional politics. For more, see: Gawdat Bahgat, “Geopolitics of energy: China and the Middle East,” *The Asia Dialogue*, April 30, 2018. <http://theasiadialogue.com/2018/04/30/geopolitics-of-energy-china-and-the-middle-east/>

While the situation at hand will inevitably challenge the status quo, it can also serve as an opportunity to initiate changes for the better. The need to diversify oil-based economies and to carry out structural reforms has never been more pressing for the governing elite. Hence, their current predicament could help realize long-awaited reforms in governance.

Another positive side effect of these developments could be to subdue regional tensions by enabling cooperation around a common economic goal. The rise of renewables is particularly important, as green energy plays an important role in electricity production, significant in a region infamous for power cuts.⁴⁵ If regional states were to invest further in green energy and decide on an integrated regional grid, they would be able to increase the reliability of renewables and to prevent shortages that occur due to changing weather conditions. They would also be able to export more of their natural resources by utilizing solar power, for example, for local consumption. The economic benefits of cross-border energy cooperation could motivate states to compartmentalize existing problems and thus eventually enhance inter-state dialogue.

In addition to the ramifications of the abundance or lack of natural resources in a particular country, the environmental and geographic conditions of the region give rise to another destabilizing factor observed in several countries: water scarcity. With 6 per cent of the world's population and 1.5 per cent of its renewable freshwater supply, the Middle East and North Africa is the most water-stressed region in the world.⁴⁶ Furthermore, due to the effects of climate change, rainfall is expected to decrease by 20 per cent by the end of the century, and accelerate desertification.

In a region suffering from insufficient levels of rainfall, the combination of rapid population growth and misguided agricultural policies points towards a further deterioration in access to water for consumption and irrigation. Due to various consequences including food insecurity and internal displacements, water scarcity is, and will continue to be, an underpinning of instability in the region.

The Syrian conflict provides a striking example of the effect of environmental factors on stability. Between 2007 and 2010, the worst ever recorded drought in the Fertile Crescent affected 60 per cent of the land in Syria, resulting in a total crop failure and a significant loss of

⁴⁵ Robin Wright, "The Lights Are Going Out in the Middle East," *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-lights-are-going-out-in-the-middle-east>

⁴⁶ George Joffe, "A worsening water crisis in North Africa and the Middle East," *The Conversation*, August 31, 2017. <http://theconversation.com/a-worsening-water-crisis-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-83197>

livestock in many governorates.⁴⁷ Throughout the drought, 1.5 million people out of Syria's total population of 20 million left rural areas for urban centers due to food insecurity and extreme poverty, leading to the overcrowding of cities which had already been hosting Iraqi refugees since the country's invasion in 2003. This phenomenon contributed to the worsening of poverty and governance-related grievances in the cities, which were amongst the underlying factors behind the uprisings in 2011.⁴⁸ Although environmental factors were not the sole triggers of the conflict in Syria, they played a significant role in amplifying the visibility of governance failures.

Similar signs of unrest related to environmental factors are also present in Iran. While the country's diminishing water resources fall short of matching its rapid population growth, they are also strained by mismanagement and agricultural policies favoring the cultivation of crops that rely heavily on irrigation, such as wheat.⁴⁹ Coupled with the effect of sanctions on the population, water scarcity and desertification have created a major breaking point, necessitating more effective policy design and implementation by the government for the delivery of basic services.⁵⁰ The lack of such policies was arguably one of the main contributors to the grievances in Iran that resulted in widespread protests in January 2018. As climate reports project a further deterioration of Iran's water stress over the next decades, it will become increasingly important to review agricultural policies and provide relief to the affected population to prevent destabilizing unrest.

Although there are several indicators of continued, if not growing, water-related regional instability in the future, one way to look at this major problem is to see it as a common concern of multiple countries which could provide a foundation for cooperation. One could argue that water resource management could provide a starting point in a similar fashion to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 which laid the foundations of the European Union.⁵¹ The political will of concerned countries, all of whom would achieve great economic benefits from institutionalized water cooperation, would be the main determinant of the feasibility of this ambitious yet possible project.

⁴⁷ Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrell, "Syria: Climate Change, Drought and Social Unrest," The Center for Climate Security, February 29, 2017. <https://climateandsecurity.org/2012/02/29/syria-climate-change-drought-and-social-unrest/>

⁴⁸ "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>

⁴⁹ "Iran's Water Crisis," *Al Jazeera*, November 13, 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2016/11/iran-water-crisis-161109114752047.html>

⁵⁰ Somini Sengupta, "Warming, Water Crisis, Then Unrest: How Iran Fits an Alarming Pattern," *The New York Times*, January 18, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/18/climate/water-iran.html>

⁵¹ Ross Harrison, *Toward a Regional Framework for the Middle East*, policy paper, Middle East Institute, December 2016. http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP10_Harrison_RCS_regionalframework_web_0.pdf

D. External Interference

As a result of its location between continents and seas, as well as its natural resources, the Middle East has long been an area of interest and a source of geopolitical conflict for great powers.⁵² A number of political, economic, and humanitarian motivations have led to varying degrees of interference in the domestic and bilateral affairs of the countries of the region. This interference has in some instances ended conflicts, but in others initiated them.

In the post-Cold War context dominated by the rise of non-state actors, great powers are reluctant to put boots on the ground to shape outcomes in the region. However, they still seek to preserve their regional influence by maintaining a military presence. Amid prolonged discussions of a retreat from the Middle East, the US remains heavily invested in the region, with numerous military bases and facilities in Arab states, as well as in Turkey and Israel.⁵³ Meanwhile, Russia continues efforts to expand its military presence by enlarging its bases in Syria and reaching an agreement with Cairo to use Egyptian airspace and military bases.⁵⁴ It can be said that the US and Russia continue to be involved in the region's affairs especially when they see relatively low-cost opportunities to achieve the outcomes they desire.⁵⁵

The most direct form of involvement, and the most relevant for an analysis of the underpinnings of instability, is military intervention. Such actions seek to eliminate the existing rulers or the regime in the targeted country, yet, in practice, they have ended up dismantling state institutions in their entirety, causing unemployment, rupturing the social fabric, and thereby sewing resentment along the way. It can be argued that the emergence or strengthening of terrorist organizations such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State, respectively, in the aftermath of foreign interventions were the unintended yet grave consequences of external interference.⁵⁶ Furthermore, this causal link suggests the existence of an

⁵² Sönmez Köksal, "Jeopolitik Depremler," *Milliyet*, March 05, 2013. <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/dusunenlerin-dusuncesi/jeopolitik-depremler-1676405/>

⁵³ For a full list of these facilities, see *U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East*, report, American Security Project, June 2018. <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Ref-0213-US-Military-Bases-and-Facilities-Middle-East.pdf>

⁵⁴ Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru, eds. *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* challiot paper, July 2018. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_146.pdf

⁵⁵ David Gardner, "Britain, America and the battle for mastery of the Middle East," *Financial Times*, November 30, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/ae598e8e-e673-11e8-8a85-04b8afea6ea3>

⁵⁶ See: Neil Swidey, "Tipping Points," *The Boston Globe*, April 27, 2013. <http://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2003/04/27/tipping-points/OkWKMz8oZtZFBUwuewZSVM/story.html> and Neil Swidey, "Where did ISIS come from? The story starts here," *The Boston Globe*, March 10, 2016. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2016/03/10/where-did-isis-come-from-the-story-starts-here/eOHwjQgnZPNj8SE91Vw5hK/story.html>

unfortunate cycle in which foreign intervention paves the way for the creation or strengthening of non-state armed groups, whose activities incite major instabilities that affect countries beyond the region, and provide justifications for further intervention.

It is worth noting that in some contexts, insufficient action by global actors can be destabilizing as well. Although the use of chemical weapons in Syria has been a cause of deep concern for the international community, the perpetrators could not be identified and brought to justice despite the extensive efforts of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and OPCW-UN Investigation Mechanism, thereby spawning anxiety regarding the future of the international prohibition against the use of chemical weapons. The UNSC and other international institutions such as the OPCW, as well as their member states, must deploy every effort to protect these hard-earned norms.

A more indirect, albeit still high-impact, form of external involvement is proxy wars. When external powers perceive the outcome of a conflict to be of great importance for them but are unwilling or unable to intervene directly due to a variety of concerns – ranging from legitimacy to human and financial costs and consequences – they instead provide support to local parties to the conflict. These actors can be legitimate state authorities or armed groups challenging the state, and the nature of the support can vary from tactical advice to military training and the provision of weapons and ammunition. The conflicts in Syria and Yemen, which are addressed in more detail under the section on country dynamics, exemplify how proxy wars tilt the balance in conflicts, thereby prolonging the wars and leading to immense human suffering.

Another tool for external influence is sanctions regimes. Although they do not have as quick and decisive footprints as military interventions do, sanctions can have significant political and economic effects over the long term, as they seek to affect the behavior of the leadership of the country that they are imposed on through substantial economic pressure. If the sanctions are not targeted at specific individuals, they are likely to cause poverty and unrest, which may or may not alter the behavior of the leaders in the intended way. For instance, until the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program was signed, the unilateral and multilateral sanctions regimes imposed on Iran had led to economic hardship for the Iranian public, but, at the same time, had provoked the leadership and increased the risks of nuclear proliferation. The unwavering suspicion of the United States regarding Iran's intentions, as manifested by its decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and re-impose sanctions on Iran, will continue to be a key factor affecting regional dynamics.

Despite the potentially destabilizing effects of foreign influence, external actors can use their influence to bring about positive outcomes in the region as well. If, instead of taking unilateral action, these actors provided support for regional or sub-regional initiatives to address conflict, they would be assisting local actors who have the knowledge and legitimacy to understand and address the subtleties of situations on the ground.

When formulating such initiatives, some of the principles used in the context of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) could serve as a source of inspiration. A set of norms, such as sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty, inviolability of borders, territorial integrity of states, and non-intervention in the internal affairs of states may reassure regional states, and serve as trust-building measures.

The three-dimensional approach to security of the OSCE would be particularly relevant for the Middle East. While cooperation in “hard” security topics would lay the foundations of collaboration, a second dimension should foster trade, reconstruction, investment, and economic integration. In a third dimension, the region’s human potential could be mobilized by supporting increased people-to-people contacts and encouraging dialogue across the region.

In this context, the first phase would require a comprehensive and sustainable ceasefire in Syria and in other conflicts. This should include de-conflicting measures such as the establishment of additional safe zones in Syria, in line with the political solution within the framework of the Geneva and Astana processes.

III. THE COUNTRY DYNAMICS AFFECTING REGIONAL STABILITY

A. War-torn Failed States: Syria and Yemen

The protracted conflicts in Syria and Yemen have led to hundreds of thousands of casualties, millions of refugees and internally displaced people, and major destruction of civilian infrastructure. With various underlying factors, multiple intervening actors, and ongoing fighting, these conflicts have led to the failure of two states, intensified the antagonisms in the region, and even led to friction between major global powers.

In early 2011, at the dawn of the Arab Uprisings, it did not take long before the wave of pro-democracy protests took hold of Syria, but as opposed to Tunisia and Egypt, the demands for political liberation and change were met with a severe crackdown and increased government pressure. The uprisings soon turned into a bloody civil conflict, and then into a multi-sided proxy war with many actors ranging from great powers to neighboring countries, from armed opposition groups to state armed forces, and from militia groups to self-declared caliphates.

Several factors have contributed to the intensification of the conflict. To begin with, contrary to the beliefs of the protesters and their foreign backers, President Bashar al-Assad managed to cling to power thanks to domestic and external support. While the rebel-held areas soon turned into rubble and their access to food and services was cut, the government kept up a façade of normalcy in the urban centers that it controlled. As the government secured the backing of the Russian Federation and Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia extended their support to the opposition. Despite the common objective of defeating terrorism, the United States and the Russian Federation often clashed over Syria, especially on the use of chemical weapons in contravention to international law. Russia's extensive, long-term military intervention in Syria, which was unexpected at the outset, helped Moscow realize a number of regional strategic goals simultaneously. Not only did it manage to convey the image of a reliable ally and divert attention from the crisis in Ukraine, but it also succeeded in extending, modernizing, and ensuring the permanent presence of its naval and air bases in Syria.⁵⁷ The intervention also paved the way for the

⁵⁷ Simon Saradzhyan, "Russia's Interest in Syria is Not Assad," Harvard Kennedy School - Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, October 21, 2015. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/russias-interest-syria-not-assad>

potential involvement of Russian energy companies in the construction and operation of Syrian energy infrastructure, and expanded Moscow's role in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the long run, the latter could enable Russia to exert further influence on the European gas supply.⁵⁸ Overall, the emergence of Syria as an area of geopolitical rivalry, conflict, and instability continues to have a dramatic impact across the region, even though the danger of the Islamic State has mostly been thwarted and the Syrian government has re-established control over major rebel strongholds.

With indescribable human suffering, an immense migration crisis, a great deal of foreign involvement, and disputes over the future of the country, Syria maintains its prominence on the regional as well as the global agenda. As one side of the conflict has capitalized on sectarianism and the other has supported non-jihadist extremist groups fighting the Syrian government, even when the conflict finally ends, the complex dynamics in Syria will continue to have ramifications for regional stability.

Even if Syria manages to overcome the immense crises it has been struggling with, divisions within its society, persistent authoritarianism in its political culture, and the after-effects of the civil conflict will render the climate un conducive for democratic transition.⁵⁹ Moreover, in the aftermath of the crisis, Syria will undoubtedly need financial assistance in order to overcome the costs of post-war reconstruction and the reintegration of returning refugees. In this context, third countries involved in the conflict can be expected to play a determining role, and the future of Syria – as well as the Assad family – will largely depend on the discussions between these external parties.

The conflict in Yemen bears resemblance to the Syrian conflict in that it also involves a multiplicity of actors, the use of divisive sectarian policies to gather support, and a shocking civilian tragedy – the situation in Yemen currently constitutes the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.⁶⁰ Although it began more recently than that of Syria, the conflict in Yemen, too, has been going on for several years without any sign of nearing an end.

⁵⁸ Nikita Sogoloff, "Russia's Energy Goals in Syria," The Washington Institute Fikra Forum, August 30, 2017. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/russias-energy-goals-in-syria>

⁵⁹ Katerina Dalacoura, "Democratic Transitions in the Levant: Prospects for Restoring a Regional Order," in *The Levant; Search for a Regional Order* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018), 67.

⁶⁰ Hamid Dabashi, "The mayhem in Yemen and the crisis of meaning in the Arab World," *Al Jazeera*, July 24, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/mayhem-yemen-crisis-meaning-arab-world-180724121333300.html>

Initially organized around a Shi'ite theological movement, the Houthis in Yemen began to radicalize after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁶¹ Although the Houthis clashed with the government on several occasions after that, their rebellion did not take the form of a civil war until 2014, when they colluded with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh against the incumbent President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who was supported by Saudi Arabia, and took control of the capital within a few months. In response, through the military campaign of a coalition led by Saudi Arabia, which was also backed by the United States, the government of Yemen established a blockade over Houthi-controlled areas. Although not officially recognized, having secured the support of Iran, the Houthis in turn maintained their control over the capital as well as two critical port cities, and launched missile attacks against targets in Saudi Arabia. In the meantime, the humanitarian toll of the conflict has continued to rise.⁶²

In spite of the magnitude of the humanitarian catastrophe made up of civilian casualties, displacements, famine, and disease, the conflict in Yemen has not received as much global attention as the Syrian conflict. It is nonetheless an important factor in the region's future stability. If the fighting continues at the current rate, when the conflict is over, its outcome will be a deeply divided country in ruins.

One reason for cautious optimism regarding the two conflicts is the fact that the efforts to resolve them in international fora have recently accelerated: work has been underway since the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi in January 2018 to establish a constitutional committee in Syria, and a process under the auspices of the UN has been launched to bring the conflicting parties in Yemen together for negotiations. Going beyond ensuring a temporary cessation of hostilities in these countries and bringing sustainable peace and development will necessitate domestic reforms to address the root causes of violence.

⁶¹ Bruce Riedel, "Who are the Houthis, and why are we in war with them?," *Brookings Blog*, December 18, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/>

⁶² "Yemen Profile – Timeline," *BBC News*, November 5, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704951>

B. The Rivalry Between Iran and Saudi Arabia

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is one of the most consequential dynamics of the region. Although these powerful states are not directly engaged in war with one another, the way they compete in various areas has been a significant destabilizing factor. While religious leadership appears to be the primary domain of their competition, the heart of the rivalry is each country's desire for regional dominance. The most discussed religious factor, namely the sectarian divide, would not even have come to the fore if it were not for this strategic rivalry.

As noted above, the primary domain of Iranian-Saudi competition is securing and maintaining alliances to counterbalance each other's regional power and influence. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has had very tense and antagonistic relations with the United States, which enabled it to engage much sooner and more openly with China and Russia. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, maintained a close partnership with the United States and relied on it for its foreign, economic, and security policy. Israel is another actor whose role in these complex dynamics is worthy of attention: there has been a visible warming of the relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, both of whom were openly opposed the JCPOA and perceive Iran as a direct threat to their security. Meanwhile, Tehran and Riyadh are engaged in a proxy war in Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition has been trying to force Iranian-backed Houthi rebels out of the country since they seized control of the capital Sana'a in 2014.⁶³ The support that the two countries receive through these alliances for their regional policies exacerbates the destabilizing effects of their rivalry.

The second source of their competition is religious leadership. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, Iran's policy of exporting its brand of theocratic rule as a model of Islamic revolution challenged Saudi Arabia's self-assigned role of Islamic leadership. Then, the increasing influence of Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as the removal, with Saddam Hussein's deposition, of a powerful anti-Iran ruler in Iraq, tilted the balance against Saudi Arabia, which came to see Iran as an existential threat. The rivalry reached a breaking point with the Arab Uprisings, when both countries capitalized on and worsened the sectarian divide to safeguard their power and alliances. In general, Iran supported the Nusayri and Shi'ite rulers of Syria and Iraq, while Saudi

⁶³ Kareem Fahim, "U.N. probe details fallout of proxy war in Yemen between Saudi coalition and Iran," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/un-probe-details-fallout-of-proxy-war-in-yemen-between-saudi-coalition-and-iran-/2018/01/11/3e3f9302-f644-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042_story.html?utm_term=.22189f49023c

Arabia supported the Sunni protesters in these countries.⁶⁴ The conflicts in Syria and Yemen, as explained in the previous section, then became proxy battlegrounds for the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as they actively supported the parties to these conflicts based on their sectarian affiliations. Another country affected by the rivalry is Lebanon, where Iran exerts a strong influence through Hezbollah. The recent events that started with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's sudden visit to Saudi Arabia have been shrouded in a veil of secrecy. Allegations that the Kingdom had detained Hariri against his will were followed by his unexpected resignation in a televised address from Riyadh. During this address, the prime minister accused Iran and its coalition partner Hezbollah of plotting his assassination. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that the Iranian-Saudi rivalry played a major part in this debacle.⁶⁵ As long as these countries continue to use sectarianism as both an end and a means, they will strengthen dictatorships, militias, and religious extremism.⁶⁶

The third area of fierce competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the race to reform their economies, both of which rely heavily on oil production.⁶⁷ They both have high unemployment rates – including educated youth – and limited female participation in the workforce. In this context, the unexpected drop in oil prices in 2014 proved once again that they needed to diversify their economies to mitigate the effects of oil price fluctuations. Currently, Iran is implementing its “20-year vision,” whereas Saudi Arabia has launched its “Vision 2030,” both of which are initiatives aimed at transitioning into post-oil economies.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the transition period is laden with significant challenges for both countries. Saudi Arabia is coming to terms with the fact that its distributional state model is no longer financially sustainable.⁶⁹ In Iran, on

⁶⁴ Alex Henley, “How Sectarian Conflicts Overtook the Arab Spring,” Georgetown Walsh School of Foreign Service, 2016. <https://sfs.georgetown.edu/sectarian-conflicts-overtook-arab-spring/>

⁶⁵ Yaroslav Trofimov, “Hariri Wants Lebanon Kept Out of the Saudi-Iranian Conflict,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hariri-wants-lebanon-kept-out-of-the-saudi-iranian-conflict-1515697159>

⁶⁶ Max Fisher, “How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=1

⁶⁷ Anthony Bubalo, “*The Middle East in 2016 (part 3): Saudi Arabia, Iran and the economics of change*,” *The Interpreter*, March 18, 2016. <http://lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/middle-east-2016-part-3-saudi-arabia-iran-and-economics-change>

⁶⁸ Danila Bochkarev and Jan Hanrath, *Envisioning the Future: Iranian and Saudi Perspectives on the Post-Oil Economy*, policy briefing, March 18, 2016. http://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/07_carpobrief_18-04-17_printerfriendly-1.pdf

⁶⁹ Steffen Hertog, “Challenges to the Saudi distributional state in the age of austerity,” in *Saudi Arabia: Domestic, Regional and International Challenges*, December 15, 2016. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68625/>

the other hand, moderate President Hassan Rouhani is under pressure to deliver on the economic promises tied to the signing of the JCPOA, with the additional challenge of US President Donald Trump's decision to reimpose wide-ranging sanctions. Both countries need strong economies to maintain domestic stability and finance their regional ventures, which intensifies the competition.

Fortunately, one potential race between the two countries that has not materialized so far is a nuclear arms race. Iran's ambitious and non-transparent nuclear program had long been a source of global concern, until the JCPOA was signed to curb its nuclear weapons development. Although the JCPOA was a major diplomatic success, several factors, including its time limit, the decision of the United States to withdraw, and the perception amongst the Iranian public that the removal of sanctions has not brought the desired level of economic improvement, give alarming signs for the fate of the agreement. In the meantime, Saudi Arabia is developing a nuclear energy capacity, which would serve to diversify its economy, reduce its reliance on fossil fuels, counter Iran if it develops nuclear weapons, and increase the chances of Saudi Arabia's regional superiority.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Riyadh has expressed its intention to follow suit if Iran develops nuclear weapons. Should that frightening scenario materialize, it will have grave consequences for the region as well as the rest of the world. For now, however, Riyadh focuses on an arms race of conventional weaponry, as the Kingdom retains the title of the world's largest arms importer.⁷¹

Finally, President Trump's policies aimed at the "encirclement of Iran with the objective of toppling the regime" have created a new solidarity, mainly between the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, against Tehran. It is questionable whether this policy will succeed. In any case, it will introduce new tensions and risks to the region as a whole.

Just as governance failure is a central and crosscutting issue amongst the regional underpinnings of instability, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry is one of the most significant country-related dynamics affecting regional stability. Moreover, it cannot be addressed without willingness on the part of both countries, and it will inhibit the creation of conditions conducive to peace and development in the region while it persists in its current level of intensity.

⁷⁰ "Saudi Arabia's Oil Dependence: Challenges Ahead," The Institute for International Political Studies, April 20, 2016. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/saudi-arabias-oil-dependence-challenges-ahead-14997>

⁷¹ Ed Crooks, "Five Charts That Explain Saudi Arabia's Importance to the Global Arms Trade," *Financial Times*, October 23, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/dd836c34-d60b-11e8-a854-33d6f82e62f8>

C) The Situation in Iraq

In case one needed a stark reminder of the extent to which Iraq's stability can affect the region, it would suffice to look at the brief but catastrophic "reign" of the Islamic State. Unfortunately, following the elimination of a self-declared caliphate from its territory, "stable" is still far from an accurate description of the current state of affairs in Iraq. Fifteen years after its invasion by a United States-led coalition with the promises of liberation and democracy, the country remains mired in corruption, sectarianism, and foreign influence, and is grappling with the aftershocks of a three-year war on terrorism.⁷²

Following the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003, the United States established the Iraqi Governing Council to take over the leadership of the country. The governing body was designed to attain an ethno-sectarian balance, and, with the composition of its members, enable a proportional representation of different segments of the society: thirteen Shi'ite, five Sunni, five Kurdish, one Turkmen, and one Assyrian. In addition, the posts of prime minister as well as the ministers of interior and foreign relations were allocated to the Shi'ites, and those of parliament speaker and minister of defense, a post overshadowed by commanders and militia leaders, were reserved for the Sunnis. Although the system was designed to foster inclusivity, it gave way to the manipulation of sectarian divisions for political purposes, namely, the marginalization of Sunnis.⁷³ Moreover, all individuals in the public sector and the military with ties to the Ba'ath Party were dismissed, which led to a significant loss of expertise, including in ministries critical for the recovery of the country such as the Oil Ministry, and resulted in unemployed and frustrated masses.

The feeling of exclusion felt by the Sunnis and other supporters of the previous regime as a result of these developments contributed to the ability of Sunni extremist organizations, such as the Islamic State, to increase their ideological appeal and recruit in the country. Another consequence of the sudden elevation of the Shi'ite community to a position of power after years of oppression under Saddam Hussein was Iran's expansion of its sphere of influence. The prominence of Shi'ite militias supported by Iran in the fight against Islamic State militants served to expand this

⁷² Tallha Abdulrazaq, "14 years on, where's Iraq's democracy?," *The Arab Weekly*, March 19, 2017. <http://www.theArabweekly.com/Opinion/8055/14-years-on%2C-where%E2%80%99s-Iraq%E2%80%99s-democracy%3F>

⁷³ Jon B. Alterman, "Avoiding Old Traps in Iraq," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 19, 2016. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/avoiding-old-traps-iraq>

sphere even further, which inevitably bolstered Saudi Arabia's concerns regarding Iran's increasing influence in the region. The fight against terrorism also increased the strength and regional importance of, as well as international support for, the Kurdistan Regional Government. Nevertheless, the decision of KRG leader Masoud Barzani to hold an independence referendum, the results of which were not recognized by the Iraqi government, led to reversals in the territorial gains made throughout the conflict with the Islamic State, and created another stream of grievances within Iraq.

After the defeat of terrorism in the country and the re-establishment of state control over territories previously captured by the Islamic State, in order to begin a new chapter characterized by stability and development, Iraq needs to address several challenges. To begin with, there is a need for an extensive reconstruction process that is locally owned and directed. Iraq estimated that rebuilding the country, most importantly critical civilian infrastructure, would cost around 88 billion USD over the short and medium-terms. The reconstruction is bound to be a lengthy process, and so far, only two thirds of the required funding has been secured. Secondly, the country needs to overcome its entrenched sectarianism. Despite the fact that the ethno-sectarian quota system has been widely criticized and its removal has been repeatedly promised to the Iraqi electorate, it is still intact. Furthermore, it can be argued that the holding of the first parliamentary elections after the defeat of the Islamic State in May 2018 under the same quota system may have reinforced the identity-based divides in the country.⁷⁴ Finally, and most importantly, Iraq needs to improve its governance. In 2015 and 2018, protesters in different parts of the country complained of familiar issues that continue to be observed in the majority of the region: corruption, unemployment, and failures in the delivery of services. Containing Iranian influence over Baghdad is also important in this regard, as Tehran has not eschewed exerting pressure, for instance, when it prevented the Iraqi government from providing services in the aftermath of the elections on 12 May 2018.⁷⁵ Bearing in mind that the same grievances had led to revolutions and civil wars throughout and after the Arab Uprisings, and the fact that these are longstanding issues in Iraq, it is clear that they need to be addressed to ensure long-term stability in the country.

⁷⁴ Renad Mansour, "What to expect from Iraq's election on Saturday," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2018. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/07/what-to-expect-from-iraqs-post-islamic-state-elections/?utm_term=.27b087d611df)

⁷⁵ Geneive Abdo, "As U.S.-Iran Tensions Grow, Iraqis Suffer," *Bloomberg*, July 24, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-07-24/as-u-s-iran-tensions-grow-iraqis-suffer>

D) The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

For several decades after the founding of the state of Israel, the Arab-Israeli wars remained at the core of regional politics. Starting from the 1980s, however, with the Iranian Revolution, Iraq's war against Iran, and its invasion of Kuwait, the focus of regional political dynamics shifted. While an increasingly powerful Iran was the lead beneficiary of this shift, Israel also saw an increase in its available options for regional allies; as antagonism against Israel lost its significance as a uniting factor for the Arab countries, Israel became capable of normalizing relations with them, and the issue was reframed as the Palestinian question.⁷⁶

At the outset of the Arab Uprisings, Israel observed the developments with concern, fearing the consequences of the rise of Islamist parties in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt on its own security. In addition to the concern over a potential strengthening of anti-Israeli sentiment in the region, Israel also feared a deterioration in its relations with Egypt, which would result in economic and security-related setbacks.⁷⁷ The military coup eased those fears, and brought Israel and Egypt closer than they had ever been. As Israel continued to improve its regional relations, the Palestinian issue remained on the sidelines with the exception of the bloody 50-day conflict between Hamas and Israel in 2014.⁷⁸

Tensions surrounding the Palestinian question resurfaced following the decision of US President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel on December 6, 2017 and move the US Embassy there as of March 2018. The decision met with harsh criticism during the Extraordinary Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul. What is more, this controversial decision was followed by the cessation of US aid to Palestine, as the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (ATCA) came into force in early 2019.⁷⁹ In addition to the recent political and security-related developments, the humanitarian aspect of the Palestinian issue is another reason for the current level of international attention. In the twelfth year of Israel's blockade to weaken Hamas, Gaza is in dire humanitarian condition, with life-threatening shortages of food, drinking water, electricity, and social services.

⁷⁶ Marc Lynch, "New Arab World Order," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 16, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/16/new-arab-world-order-pub-77056>

⁷⁷ Benedetta Berti, "Israel and the Arab Spring: Understanding Attitudes and Responses to the 'New Middle East'," Al Mesbar Studies and Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 2013. https://www.fpri.org/docs/chapters/201303.west_and_the_muslim_brotherhood_after_the_arab_spring.chapter8.pdf

⁷⁸ Michael Sharnoff, "Iran has driven Israel and the Gulf Arab states together," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/01/03/iran-has-driven-israel-and-the-gulf-arab-states-together/?utm_term=.ea19c72c1507

⁷⁹ Yolanda Knell, "US Stops All Aid to Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza," *BBC News*, February 01, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47095082>

Although a two-state solution seems more distant than ever in light of the recent developments, it remains the most viable solution to attain a durable and sustainable peace. The issue is also making a comeback in the international agenda, after having been overshadowed for several years by the Syrian conflict and the fight against IS. For Egypt's efforts to broker a long-term truce between Israel and Hamas to succeed, and to achieve intra-Palestinian reconciliation, the supporters of Israel's blockade against Gaza – including the Palestinian Authority – need to realize that the blockade is only leading to terrible human suffering and keeping the Palestinians divided, instead of ensuring Israel's security and weakening Hamas. Such a shift in understanding would contribute significantly to peace between Israel and Palestine.

The resolution of the Palestinian question in a manner that ensures the security and development of both communities within their sovereign and independent states is bound to eliminate a major obstacle towards the creation of a more peaceful and cooperative environment in the region.

It should be noted, however, that Israel is a significant regional actor whose impact extends beyond the Palestinian impasse, especially due to its ongoing competition with Iran and important effect on the delicate regional power balance. Tehran's efforts to establish a permanent presence in Syria and maintain its support to Hezbollah have prompted Israeli pushback, in the form of regular strikes against Iranian-backed militias across its border.⁸⁰ Taking advantage of the uncertainties in Syria and the favorable attitude of the Trump administration,⁸¹ Israel convinced Washington to recognize the annexation of the Golan Heights.⁸² Simultaneously, Israel has also been successful in its efforts to carry out a rapprochement with a number of Arab states – important for the Netanyahu government's posturing, because the improvement of ties demonstrates that aggressive policies against Palestinians do not necessarily result in further regional isolation.⁸³ These developments could usher in a new era of uncertainty with the conclusion of the war in Syria.

⁸⁰ Richard C. Baffa and Nathan Vest, "The Growing Risk of a New Middle East War," RAND, August 21, 2018. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/08/the-growing-risk-of-a-new-middle-east-war.html>

⁸¹ Steve Holland and Jeff Mason, "Trump Recognizes Golan Heights as Israeli, Boosting Netanyahu and Angering Syria," *Reuters*, March 25, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-israel/in-boost-for-netanyahu-trump-signs-proclamation-recognizing-golan-heights-as-israeli-territory-idUSKCN1R61S6?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

⁸² The Golan Heights is not only a strategic military plateau but also very rich in natural resources. Over a third of Israel's water originates from the Golan Heights. See: Zena Agha, "What's Driving Israeli Claims to the Golan Heights?" *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2018-11-01/whats-driving-israeli-claims-golan-heights>

⁸³ Omar H. Rahman, "What's behind the Relationship between Israel and Arab Gulf States?" *Brookings Institution*, January 28, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/28/whats-behind-the-relationship-between-israel-and-arab-gulf-states>

E) The Situation in Egypt

The Arab Uprisings arrived in Egypt quite early on, because the masses filling Tahrir Square were fed up with Hosni Mubarak's decades-long oppression, and were encouraged by the success of the Tunisian revolution. Similar to other parts of the region, the protesters demanded an end to the autocratic rule of Mubarak, which they deemed responsible for the pervasive corruption, poverty, and unemployment in the country. Fast-forward several years, through an uprising, one military coup, and two overthrown governments, and Egypt has turned into a security state rather than a democracy.⁸⁴ Considering the size and population of the country, stability in Egypt is important not only from the perspective of a case study on failed attempts at democratization: Egypt could lift the Arab world with its success, and create far-reaching volatilities with its failure.⁸⁵ For the former scenario to materialize, there are several challenges that need to be overcome.

The first of these challenges is security. The security vacuum in the Sinai Peninsula, which predates the revolution, has become an even larger problem in the aftermath of two forced changes of government. The area has turned into a breeding ground for Islamist militants, and, as a result, numerous attacks over the past couple of years targeting civilians, police officers, soldiers, and government officials have claimed hundreds of lives. Targets of attacks have even included an aircraft, popular tourist destinations, and places of worship of different religions. With the expulsion of IS from Iraq and Syria, it is likely that the Sinai will become a sanctuary and base of operations for militants fleeing other parts of the region. Moreover, as part of the Egyptian government's military campaign against the militants, widespread demolitions and forced evictions are being conducted in the area without the adequate provision of alternative housing, which could lead to potentially destabilizing grievances.⁸⁶

Secondly, the underlying governance failures that had led to the revolution remain unresolved. On top of ongoing problems related to employment and service delivery, the country fell back into the grip of authoritarianism after the coup against the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government. Although the organization's short-lived experience in government was a disappointment for proponents of a

⁸⁴ David Gardner, "A new balance of power in the Middle East," *Financial Times*, December 28, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/0ebf028c-c6db-11e6-8f29-9445cac8966f>

⁸⁵ "What is the Arabic of Democracy?" *The Economist*, May 12, 2016. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2016/05/12/what-is-the-arabic-for-democracy>

⁸⁶ "Egypt: Army Intensifies Sinai Home Demolitions," Human Rights Watch, May 22, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/22/egypt-army-intensifies-sinai-home-demolitions>

democratic Egypt, the military's takeover, alongside its designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, was a continuation of the past mistake of excluding Islamists from the political sphere. This could radicalize the supporters of the organization in Egypt and other parts of the region.

Egypt has significant challenges on the economic front as well, including those created by the fast pace of population growth, which job markets cannot catch up with. Added to these are challenges related to climate change, including rising sea levels, increased water scarcity, and loss of arable land.⁸⁷ Furthermore, although the 2016 falling out with Saudi Arabia seems not to have affected remittances negatively, there has been a significant drop in tourism revenues due to the ongoing volatility and insecurity.⁸⁸ It is worth mentioning, however, that a few trends provide grounds for hope in the future of Egypt's economy. One of them is the fiscal reforms that have contributed to the stabilization of public finances; the other is the discovery in June 2018 of a huge gas reserve of 2.5 trillion cubic meters in the Egyptian Exclusive Economic Zone, in the Noor field of the Mediterranean Sea. Together with another discovery of 850 billion cubic meters in 2015, Egypt has now become one of the ten countries with the largest proven gas reserves in the world.⁸⁹

Although it is clear that destabilizing developments in Egypt can have a major negative impact on regional security, the country also has the necessary strength and influence to make positive contributions to peace and stability in the region. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, due to the growing US presence in the region, Egypt lost its competitive edge as the reliable ally in a distant region whose efforts to promote stability merited support. Considering Western countries' fatigue from involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia's preference for continuing their fight for regional dominance rather than collectively building the foundations of regional security, Egypt might be the region's best bet for a country that is both capable of taking initiative to promote stability, and willing to do so. Egypt's success in brokering an interim truce between Israel and Hamas to enable the flow of goods to Gaza, as well as its extensive efforts to reach a long-term peace deal, shows that Egypt might be eager and able to play that part, as it has been in the past.

⁸⁷ The head of Egypt's statistical agency defined the boom as a "catastrophe." While the UN projected Egypt's population to hit 96 million in 2026, the figure was already 104.5 million by 2017: Ömer Karasapan and Sajjad Shah, "Egypt's population: Boom then bust?" *Brookings Blog*, May 22, 2018. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/05/22/egypts-population-boom-then-bust/?utm_campaign=Brookings%20Brief&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=63176809

⁸⁸ Maged Mandour, "As relations sour with Saudi Arabia, Egypt is looking to Russia to fill the financial void," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 03, 2016. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/65030>

⁸⁹ Yaşar Yakış, "Turkey should not be left out of the scramble for Mediterranean gas," *Ahval News*, November 30, 2018. <https://ahvalnews-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/ahvalnews.com/node/32152amp>

F) The Internal Conflicts of the GCC

The internal dynamics of the GCC countries are another factor that has affected regional stability, especially since the beginning of the Arab Uprisings. During the uprisings, the shifts in power balances resulting from the revolutions exacerbated the differences in policy and priorities between Saudi Arabia and Qatar: the support extended to the Muslim Brotherhood by Qatar was perceived as a security threat by Saudi Arabia, which feared that the Muslim Brotherhood might gain regional prominence after its electoral victory in Egypt.⁹⁰ As the tensions escalated, in 2014, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain withdrew their Ambassadors from Qatar on the grounds that it supported extremist armed groups. The real breaking point in the dynamics came in June 2017, however, when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt cut their relations with Qatar, and imposed a land, sea, and air embargo. These four countries were soon joined by Jordan, which scaled back its diplomatic relations with Qatar.

The ongoing boycott against Qatar has so far had several consequences in the region, but not the intended one: that of weakening and pressuring Qatar to the extent that it renounces its support for groups that are considered terrorists and/or dangerous. Over time, it became evident that the power of Qatar, the richest country in the world in terms of per capita income, was grossly underestimated.⁹¹ Rather than remain isolated, Qatar strengthened its ties with Turkey and Iran, while also furthering economic and defense relations with Russia.⁹² The United States has curtailed its criticism of Qatar as well, and commended the country for its efforts to counter terrorism. These unintended consequences show that as they become entangled in internal rifts, the GCC countries tacitly invite greater involvement on the part of external powers, both in their relations and in the politics of their region, potentially exacerbating existing antagonisms and creating further instability. Moreover, the continuation of the standoff dims the GCC's prospects for maintaining its influence and relevance.

It is hoped that given the importance of the GCC, efforts will be made to resolve the Qatar crisis sooner rather than later. The recent history of the region provides ample evidence that policies of exclusion trigger further instability, rather than incentivizing actors to change their behavior as desired.

⁹⁰ Saudi Arabia has long resented Qatar's efforts to pursue an independent foreign policy that challenges Riyadh's regional influence through a range of activities, such as carrying out amicable relations with Iran, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and shaping public opinion through the news outlet Al Jazeera: David Mednicoff, "Why have other Gulf states cut ties with Qatar?" *The Conversation*, June 7, 2017. <http://theconversation.com/why-have-other-gulf-states-cut-ties-with-qatar-78906>

⁹¹ "The continuing blockade of Qatar makes no sense," *Financial Times*, April 19, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/57952eba-43d9-11e8-803a-295c97e6fd0b>

⁹² Krishnadev Calamur, "America Wins the Gulf Crisis," *The Atlantic*, January 31, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/qatar-us/551873/>

G) Turkey

The vast differences among Arab countries, in terms of their political regimes, religious and sectarian affiliations, and political interests, are as troublesome for Turkey as they are for the West.

As a non-Arab country, Arab nationalism and the Arabic language do not anchor Turkey to the region; neither is the country a member of the Arab League. And while nonetheless a Muslim-majority country, Turkey stands out as a secular state in the region.

In accordance with the principles of *realpolitik*, Turkey's regional strategy up until the new millennium entailed pragmatically pursuing one-to-one relations with each Arab state, based on each state's merits, while being mindful of harming the interests of third-party countries. These principles were not only followed in relations with Arab states, but also across the region, including countries such as Iran and Israel.

Traditionally, Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations have been comprehensive, encompassing political, military, economic, and trade cooperation, as well as collaboration in the fields of education, science, and technology. The extent of this relationship was instrumental in enhancing Turkey's ability to strengthen ties with other countries, both within and outside the region. For instance, Turkey could play a role in the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations or in alleviating the hardships facing Gaza's Palestinians, largely because it was on good terms with Israel. Outside of the region, favorable relations with Tel Aviv helped overcome tensions that occasionally arose between Turkey and the United States.

Similar to the case with Israel, Turkey and Iran also enjoyed a historically steady relationship, as two non-Arab states of the region with comparable demographic sizes and a strong experience in statehood. This relationship has been a successful case of compartmentalization, as both states strived to contain areas of tension that stemmed from political and sectarian differences, as well as distinct geopolitical interests. Turkey and Iran have consistently sought to strike a balance between competition and cooperation.

Obviously, an economically stable, democratically governed Turkey in cooperation with its Western allies could have played a vital role in preserving regional and global peace. Indeed, at the turn of the millennium, there was hope in this direction, as a newfound harmony emerged between the country's secular liberals and traditional conservatives, who understood the inevitability of a globalized world.

As the pace of history accelerated from 2010 onwards, a number of developments – including but not limited to the so-called Arab Spring, Russia’s preoccupation with Eastern Europe, the Black Sea, and the Middle East, the rise of China, Brexit, diminished US capacity to control events, a transition towards a multipolar world, and shifting political perceptions within the country – have weakened Turkey’s ties with the Euro-Atlantic community. Even if the political will to mend these ties were to appear, repairing the relationship would prove difficult, as mutual trust has deeply eroded. The ongoing shift in the global balance of power, as well as Turkey’s security requirements, compel Turkey to not only keep alive its NATO membership and perspective on the EU – including aspiration to full membership - but also to develop and maintain good relations with the rest of the world.

IV) THE WAY FORWARD: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to create a policy path for the region, in addition to analyzing the region-wide underpinnings of instability and the country dynamics affecting regional stability, it is also important to consider the interactions between these factors.

An assessment of the recent unrest, upheaval, and conflict in the region shows that economic factors have been central to perpetuating existing elements of instability and creating new ones. As observed in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and several other countries not elaborated on in this report, poverty and lack of access to economic opportunities during and in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings led to a variety of responses in the region, ranging from peaceful protests to revolutions, seizures of power, and civil war. The causes of these economic grievances were related to structural factors such as fast population growth and limited diversification in economies, as well as factors related to environment and geography such as water scarcity and reduction in arable land due to climate change. These structural and environmental challenges amplified the visibility of governance failures; instead of effective policymaking meant to overcome these challenges, the aggrieved populations saw in their governments pervasive corruption and continuous failures in the delivery of basic needs and the provision of services.

A solution to these grievances – other than existing governments' adoption and implementation of adequate policies to address them – could have been found through democratic accountability, but alternative leaders or cadres either did not exist, or were excluded from the political sphere by the authoritarian governments in power. In the absence of democratic channels for expressing their grievances related to economic opportunity and governance, and also lacking hope for democratic change, some segments in these populations began to radicalize.

The beginning of radicalization was the point where identity-related underpinnings of instability came into play. Because nationhood was not a strong enough unifying factor in these countries, dissatisfied people, especially the youth, found the solution to their exclusion in an adherence to dangerous ideologies like sectarianism and jihadism. As the governments tightened their control even further to counter extremist non-state actors, the stage was set for more grievances, conflict, and the involvement of external actors who either felt threatened by the rise of terrorist groups, or saw in these conflicts opportunities for furthering their interests. In the meantime, dynamics among the countries of the region, including the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the rift between the Gulf countries, tilted the balances and increased the complexity

of these conflicts, consequently prolonging them. This prolongation has brought about the current situation in the region, characterized by poverty, conflict, and human suffering.

Due to nuances in the context of each country, the proposed causality link is inevitably simplistic and generalized, and cannot provide a perfect fit for every sequence of events in the different countries of the region that are grappling with instability and conflict. It is, nonetheless, possible to use this model to determine a sequence of recommendations to define a policy path towards stability and development in the region. The starting point for the definition of that path could be the identification of the primary issue that needs to be resolved to overcome other challenges. It is fair to say that in the case of the Middle East, the unmet expectations of the educated, unemployed, and fast-growing youth population stand out as a “ticking bomb” that could, if unresolved, lead to further instability and violence throughout the region. Although job creation and improvements in the education systems to diversify the profiles of workforce participants could remedy that problem, the fact that the investments necessary for the implementation of those policies are blocked by uncertainty and insecurity shows that a complex and multi-layered set of policy recommendations is required.

A) Domestic Policies

In order to overcome extremism, the most significant threat against stability, peace, and development in the region, it is necessary to address the root causes of radicalization, especially amongst youth. Some of the main causes, as previously explained, include high population growth and its pressure on the job market, poverty, inequality, governance failures and pervasive corruption, authoritarianism and lack of political representation, polarization along ethnic and sectarian lines, insecurity, and injustice.⁹³ Without finding solutions to these issues and effectively implementing them, ending rebellions and fighting terrorists can only cure the symptoms of instability, not bring durable peace.

It is essential to begin the necessary transformations with reforms aimed at strengthening and modernizing the economies of the countries of the region. These reforms must include efforts to diversify the industrial sector and increase the workforce participation of women and youth. Diversification could reduce the dominance of the public sector in the economy, eliminate heavy dependence on oil revenues, and create jobs.

⁹³ Anthony H. Cordesman, “Rethinking the Threat of Islamic Extremism: The Changes Needed in US Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 22, 2016. <http://us11.campaign-archive2.com/?u=833ec271d60c6750d9c3bbaac&id=8137e684c4&e=b58c022fe5> and: Lynn E. Davis and Jeffrey Martini and Kim Cragin, “A Strategy to Counter ISIL as a Transregional Threat,” Rand Corporation Perspective, 2017. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE228.html>

It should be noted, however, that the economic reforms can only succeed if they are accompanied by political liberalization; the reforms can be better tailored to the societies' needs if the people have political representation, feel that their opinions and preferences are heard, and are able to express their dissent and grievances in a peaceful and democratic manner. Political liberalization must also entail improved governance and accountability, as corruption and continued failures in the delivery of services could absorb all of the improvements in living conditions achieved with the reforms. An increase in transparency and accountability would improve investor confidence, and thereby contribute to economic development more directly as well.

Another measure to immediately follow political and economic reforms would be to improve education systems. A lack of jobs is one part of the problem faced by the educated but unemployed Arab youth; another part that should also be remedied is the heavy orientation of education toward the public sector. As the public sector has limited job and career progression opportunities, the education systems should be modified to offer skills that would unlock employment opportunities in other sectors. Furthermore, the education systems should be more secular and centered around a culture of debate, a culture that may have contributed to Tunisia's resilience to transitional shocks after its own revolution.⁹⁴

Indeed, while fewer children go without an education in the region than a decade ago, reports indicate that schooling has not been successfully transformed into learning.⁹⁵ Students in MENA countries are among the lowest performers in international standardized tests such as the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) test, and the necessity remains to modernize national curricula to develop critical thinking skills and creativity.⁹⁶ A major setback in this regard is the ongoing struggle between a secular, knowledge-based education ("taaleem" in Arabic) and a traditional understanding of education that emphasizes the acquisition of values ("tarbiya").⁹⁷ Hence, in order to overcome structural setbacks in the quality of education, states must ensure that education does not become a battleground for competing societal visions, and that education remains secular and scientific in nature.

⁹⁴ Safwan M. Masri, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, September 2017).

⁹⁵ Arne Hoel, *Education in the Middle East and North Africa*, briefing report, The World Bank, January 24, 2017. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/brief/education-in-mena>

⁹⁶ *A New Education Approach is Needed to Prepare MENA Youth to Shape the Future*, news release, The World Bank, November 13, 2018. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/11/11/a-new-education-approach-is-needed-to-prepare-mena-youth-to-shape-the-future>

⁹⁷ The World Bank Group, *Expectations and Aspirations: A New Framework for Education in the Middle East and North Africa*, Overview Booklet, 2019, 10. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/527931542039352771/pdf/131974-WP-v1-PUBLIC-nov13-6am-33255cmp-eproof.pdf>

Another obstacle to overcoming regional economic difficulties is persistent gender inequality in labor force participation, and unequal pay. While policies to increase girls' schooling have proven successful, women remain an "untapped resource," as they outnumber men in universities but account for merely 28 per cent of the labor force.⁹⁸ Unlike in other regions, married women, especially those with children, are less likely to work in Middle Eastern countries. While part of this problem is an overall lack of job opportunities, another important dimension is traditional social norms and attitudes towards the role of women in society. Hence, in order for regional economies to benefit fully from well-educated women, it is vital for countries to transform traditional gender roles and enact social and economic policies, such as gender mainstreaming, to improve gender equality.

Over the long run, and building on political liberalization and educational reforms, the lack of leadership in these societies should also be addressed. A careful and gradual strengthening of civil society institutions could remedy the absence of an alternative to oppressive rulers and extremist groups, providing new options for representation, leadership, and guidance.⁹⁹

The implementation of this sequence of policies could help overcome the dilemma of the Arab youth. If these marginalized and unemployed young people are granted representation, economic opportunities, and a chance to live a physically and financially secure life, they can become agents of positive change in the region rather than convenient prey for the recruitment activities of extremist organizations.

B) Regional Policies

Although the Middle East and North Africa is a region without deep political cohesion or a significant level of economic interdependence, the domestic developments inside one country can quickly affect others both positively and negatively. In that sense, domestic reforms alone will not be enough for creating and sustaining peace and development. There is also a need for the countries of the region to redefine their relations and bear in mind the stability of the entire region when designing their domestic policies. Under the current circumstances, devising a regional, sequenced peacebuilding agenda could prove useful for improving security and relative stability in the region.

⁹⁸ The World Bank Group, *Gender and development in the Middle East and North Africa : women in the public sphere*, Overview Booklet, 2004, 2. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMENA/Publications/20262206/genderoverview.pdf>

⁹⁹ David Gardner, *Last Chance: The Middle East in the Balance*, (New York City: I. B. Tauris Publishing, 2012).

Region-wide instability has resulted in major security threats, both regionally and globally, stemming mostly from intra-state armed conflict, failed states, belligerent non-state actors, and large migration streams. The inefficiencies of past Western initiatives on Middle Eastern security have brought skepticism at the local level towards classical multilateral solutions, bringing to the fore the importance of conceiving regional arrangements directed at preserving peace.

Any such effort should be in line with the UN Charter, but must be empowered by a robust international and regional commitment. It should effectively address the urgent problems of intra-state conflict, migration, the restoration of public order, rule of law, statehood, and sovereignty. However, in any case, hard security assurances from external actors will be necessary. In this context, the whole approach should be built on a comprehensive vision of security, meaning that societies' confidence in the effort should be ensured through collaboration among states, and the people of each country should be involved as much as possible. Key players to lead such a process could be the UN, in cooperation with regional organizations such as the Arab League or the African Union, with particular roles to be played by Turkey, Iran, and other regional actors.

Regional countries should be given political and security guarantees by major international actors and the UN Security Council, and relevant countries should reciprocate with constructive action. The establishment of this norms-based institution would help facilitate the transformation of the regional context from a competitive and confrontational one into a collaborative one. Areas of common interest, such as energy, where pragmatic collaboration may be possible, could constitute the first step in this direction. Although it would be naïve to expect decades-long rivalries to transform into partnerships overnight, an agreement on the guiding principles could contribute to creating a foundation of trust on which cooperation can be built.

In order for the region to achieve security and development concurrently, the agenda of the region for the next decade should be built around collective norms and cooperative efforts. Turkey's experience may serve as an example in this exercise.

V) CONCLUSIONS

Within the last decade, the Middle East and North Africa region has witnessed a broad spectrum of instability, ranging from civil unrest to prolonged conflicts with multiple actors on each side. These developments have inevitably had severe ramifications for security, economic development, and the quality of human life. As civilians fell victim to conflicts whose parties and aims became murkier by the day, instability continued to grow and spread across and beyond the region. Furthermore, all this happened amidst a belief, albeit short-lived, that democratization and progress would come to the region alongside a long-awaited Arab “summer.”

Nevertheless, conflict and civilian suffering is not the region’s destiny. An entirely different path is not only desirable, but also possible. If lessons from the past can be translated into policies for the present, they will bring positive outcomes in the future. Should the leaders of the region demonstrate the necessary political will to implement political and economic reforms, and to redefine their relations based on a cooperative framework and mutual confidence, stability and development will cease to be distant aspirations for the region – whose great potential, both human and in terms of natural resources, deserves to be realized.

As the countries of the region design and direct these transformations, the international community should refrain from increasing the complexity of what is already a challenging and lengthy process. It is essential to support the region in such endeavors, and to encourage relatively successful examples of democratization like that of Tunisia.

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ANNEX I: A CHRONOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS

- 1914 World War I began
- 1915-1916 Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire
- 1916 Britain and France concluded the Sykes-Picot Agreement
- 1917 Britain issued the Balfour Declaration
- 1918 World War I ended
North Yemen declared independence from the Ottoman Empire
- 1919-1921 The Franco-Syrian War
- 1921 Faisal I crowned as the King of Iraq
- 1922 Grand National Assembly of Turkey abolished the Ottoman Sultanate
France divides Syrian territory along ethnic lines, separating the Alawites and the Druze
Egypt declared independence
- 1923 Declaration of the Turkish Republic
- 1928 Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt
- 1932 Kingdoms of Hejaz and Najd were unified as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- 1934 Saudi – Yemeni War
- 1936-1939 Arab revolt in Palestine
- 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty officially ended British occupation of Egypt
- 1937 The eventually rejected report of the Peel Commission advised dividing Palestine into three zones, including a neutral territory
- 1939 World War II began
- 1943 The Ba'ath Party was founded in Damascus
Lebanon gained independence from France
- 1945 World War II ended
The Arab League was founded with six member states

- 1946 Jordan became an independent state
- 1948 Britain officially withdrew from Palestine
Israel declared independence
The Arab-Israeli War began
- 1949 Israel admitted as a United Nations member state
- 1951 The Kingdom of Libya declared independence
- 1952 The nationalist Egyptian revolution overthrew King Farouk
- 1953 The Mossadegh government in Iran was overthrown in a coup
- 1956 The Suez Crisis
- 1958-1961 Egypt and Syria united briefly as the United Arab Republic
- 1960 The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was created by five founding members: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela
- 1961 Kuwait became an independent state
- 1963 The Ba'ath Party seized power in Syria
- 1964 The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed
- 1967 The Six-Day War, also known as the Third Arab-Israeli War
- 1968 The Revolutionary Command Council seized power in Iraq
- 1969 Organisation of Islamic Cooperation was founded
Colonel Muammar Gaddafi seized power in Libya
- 1970 A short-lived peace accord between the Iraqi government and Iraqi Kurds granted autonomy to the latter and recognized Kurdish as an official language
- 1971 Hafez al-Assad became president of Syria
Qatar and Bahrain declared independence
After acquiring their independence, seven emirates joined together to form the United Arab Emirates
- 1973 The Yom Kippur War, also known as the 1973 Arab-Israeli War
The OPEC oil crisis started when the organization's Arab members imposed an oil embargo on the United States for its military support to Israel
- 1974 PLO was granted observer status at the United Nations

- 1975-1990 The Lebanese Civil War cost some 120,000 lives
- 1978 The Camp David Accords were signed between Egypt and Israel
- 1979 The Iranian Revolution replaced Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and his government with an Islamic republic
Saddam Hussein became the president of Iraq
The Egypt-Israel Treaty was signed as a result of the Camp David Accords. Egypt's memberships to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League were temporarily suspended
- 1980-1989 Iraq invaded Iran, starting the Iran-Iraq War
- 1981 The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was formally established
Hosni Mubarak became president of Egypt after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat
- 1987 Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali removed Habib Bourgiba from power and became president of Tunisia
- 1987-1990 The First Intifada began
- 1988 The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) was formed with the aim of establishing an Islamic, independent Palestinian state
- 1990-1991 Iraq invaded Kuwait, triggering the Persian Gulf War
The two Yemens united to form the Republic of Yemen
- 1993 Oslo I Accord signed between Israel and the PLO in Washington, DC
- 1994 Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was established as part of the Oslo Accords to govern autonomous Palestinian regions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip
Israel – Jordan Peace Treaty was signed
- 1995 Oslo II Accord was signed
Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated at a peace rally in Tel Aviv
- 1996 Taliban seized Kabul
- 1999 After being released from prison, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi formed a terrorist group that later evolved into the Islamic State

- 2000 Israel withdrew troops from southern Lebanon after 15 years
The Second Intifada started
- 2001 September 11 attacks carried out by al-Qaeda hit the United States
The United States invaded Afghanistan
- 2003 The United States invaded Iraq
- 2005 Religious hardliner Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, also a supporter of Iran's nuclear program, became president of Iran
New Iraqi constitution recognizes an autonomous Kurdistan region in northern Iraq, run by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)
- 2006 Saddam Hussein was executed
The Fatah – Hamas conflict resulted in the division of the Palestinian Authority with the West Bank governed by the former and Gaza by the latter
- 2008-2009 Israel attacked Hamas and started the Gaza War
- 2009 Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party came to power in Israel
- 2009 President Obama announced plan to completely withdraw from Iraq by 2011
- 2010 Israel stormed a Turkish flotilla carrying aid to Gaza; also known as the Mavi Marmara incident
A Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire, initiating the chain of popular uprisings dubbed the "Arab Spring"
Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi started to systematically recruit former Ba'athist officials in Iraq
- 2011 A wave of regime changes swept across the region as Tunisian President Zine al-Abidin Ben Ali stepped down, while Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh resigned
The NATO-led military intervention in Libya resulted in the capturing and death of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi
Governments in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Iran suppressed local uprisings
US completed troop withdrawal from Iraq
Syrian Civil War began
- 2012 Former presidents of Egypt and Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak and Zine al Abidin Ben Ali, were sentenced to life in prison by national courts

- Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was elected president in Egypt
Obama issued the famous “red line” warning on the use of chemical weapons in Syria
- 2013 A United Nations team prepared a report indicating the employment of chemical weapons in Syria
Syrian refugee crisis started to unfold as a million refugees registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)
- 2014 The Islamic State declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria
Egyptian General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi removed Mohamed Morsi from power in a coup d'état
NATO ended combat operations in Afghanistan
- 2015 Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud became new king of Saudi Arabia after King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz died. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman acquired an increasingly influential role
Saudi Arabia started launching air strikes against the Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen
Syrian refugee crisis started to unfold
The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran Deal, was signed
- 2016 Syrian government and the rebels agreed to a ceasefire
- 2017 Iraqi troops recaptured Mosul from the Islamic State
The Astana peace process was launched
US hit air base in Syria in response to the worst chemical attack in the history of the Syrian Civil War
President Hassan Rouhani won a re-election in Iran
Geneva peace talks were held on Syria
A diplomatic crisis erupted between Qatar and Saudi Arabia
The Islamic State lost most of its territorial holdings and revenue streams
- 2018 US decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel triggered widespread protests
President Trump announced decision to withdraw from the JCPOA

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Bozkurt Aran

Bozkurt Aran graduated from Ankara University's Faculty of Political Sciences in 1971 and started his career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the Third Secretary at the Department of Eastern Europe in 1973. Aran served as Vice Consul at the Salzburg Consulate General; First Secretary at the Kuala Lumpur Embassy; and Economic Counselor at the Washington Embassy. He was appointed Consul General of the Republic of Turkey in Dusseldorf, Germany (1989-1993); Ambassador to Pakistan (1998-2000); Permanent Representative at UNESCO-Paris (2002-2004); and Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Iran (2004-2006). He also served as the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Geneva (2007-2012).

In addition to fulfilling the expected functions at the WTO, Aran chaired the Trade Policy Board, the Committee on Trade and Environment, and the Accession Working Committee for Belarus, and was a member of the Management Board of the Advisory Centre on WTO Law (ACWL).

After serving as the Deputy Director General for Bilateral Relations for European Countries at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey (1993-1998), he worked as the Director General for Bilateral Economic Affairs (2000-2002) and Director General for the Middle East (2006-2008).

Aran is a member of the Bretton Woods Committee and is the director of the TEPAV Center for Multilateral Trade Studies, established in 2012.

Mustafa Aydın

Mustafa Aydın is a Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University (Istanbul), and the President of the International Relations Council of Turkey. Previously, he worked at Ankara University (1994-2005) and the Economy and Technology University (2005-2009), and was the Rector of Kadir Has University between 2010 and 2018. Professor Aydın was guest researcher and/or lecturer at Michigan (1998), Harvard (2002, Fulbright Fellow), and Athens (2003, Onassis Fellow) universities, as well as at the Richardson Institute for Peace Studies (1999, UNESCO Fellow) and the EU Institute for Security Studies (2003). In addition to Global Relations Forum, he is a member of the International Studies Association (ISA), Turkish Atlantic Council, Turkish Political Sciences Association, European Leadership Network, Greek-Turkish Forum, and European Academy of Art and Sciences. Professor Aydın's areas of interest include international politics; foreign policy analysis; security issues related to Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and the Middle East; and Turkish foreign and security policy. Among other works, he has written *International Security Today, Understanding Change and Debating Security* (with K. Ifantis, 2006), *Turkish Foreign and Security Policy* (2006), *Turkish Foreign Policy: Old Problems, New Parameters* (2010), and *Non-Traditional Security Threats and Regional Cooperation in the Southern Caucasus* (2011).

Hikmet Çetin

Mr. Hikmet Çetin was born in 1937 in Diyarbakır, Turkey. He graduated from Ankara University's Faculty of Political Sciences with a B.A. degree in Economics and Finance in 1960. In the same year, he joined Turkey's State Planning Organization (SPO). Mr. Çetin then pursued further study, mostly in the USA, and received his M.A. degree with a thesis on the economics of development. Later on, he worked on planning models at Stanford University. At the SPO, he held the position of Head of the Economic Planning Department until 1977. During this time, he was also a part-time instructor at the Middle East Technical University.

His political career started after his election to the Turkish Parliament in 1977 as a member of the Republican People's Party (CHP). He was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in 1978. In 1991, he was re-elected to parliament and then served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the two coalition governments between 1991 and 1994. He was once again appointed Minister of State and Deputy Prime Minister in 1995. In 1997, Minister Çetin was elected Speaker of the Turkish Parliament. In 2003, he was appointed NATO Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) for Afghanistan and served in Kabul from 2003 to 2006.

Memduh Karakullukçu

Memduh Karakullukçu is a Founding Member of Global Relations Forum (GRF) and has served as Vice-Chairman and President since its inception.

Previously, he served as the Founding Managing Director of Istanbul Technical University's (İTÜ) ARI Teknokent. During his tenure at İTÜ, Mr. Karakullukçu was the senior advisor to the university's president, the coordinator of the Law, Technology, and Policy graduate program and the strategic advisor at the University's Center for Satellite Communications. Mr. Karakullukçu has served as a member of the academic staff at the LSE and İTÜ.

His recent policy work at GRF includes global energy analysis, technology-related security issues, global economic/financial governance, and the economic prospects of the MENA region. His earlier academic work includes research commissioned by the IMF and the World Bank on inflation dynamics, debt instruments, and debt markets.

Mr. Karakullukçu received his B.S. in Electrical Engineering and in Economics at MIT, his M.Sc. in Finance at the LSE, and his J.D. at Columbia University.

Ali Karaosmanoğlu

Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu is a Professor Emeritus at the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University. He is also the Director of the Foreign Policy and Peace Research Center of the Ihsan Dogramaci Foundation and is the Co-Chief Editor of *All Azimuth*, the journal of the Center. He obtained a doctoral degree in International Law from the University of Lausanne, where his doctoral dissertation "*Les actions militaires coercitives et non coercitives des Nations Unies*" was awarded the prize of the Fondation Fleuret. He has taught at the Middle East Technical University and Boğaziçi University. Karaosmanoğlu has been a Fellow at The Hague Academy of International Law, a Fulbright Fellow, and a NATO Fellow, as well as a Visiting Scholar at Stanford and Princeton universities. He has served as a member of Turkish delegations to various intergovernmental conferences, and is a member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts and a board member of the Turkish Foreign Policy Institute. The author and editor of several books, Karaosmanoğlu has published on foreign policy, security and strategic studies, peacekeeping operations, and civil-military relations. His articles have appeared in journals such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Europa Archiv*, *Politique Etrangere*, *Security Dialogue*, *International Defense Review*, *Journal of International Affairs*, *Turkish Studies*, *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, and *International Relations (Uluslararası İlişkiler)*.

Sönmez Köksal

Sönmez Köksal is a retired diplomat who has served as Ambassador of Turkey to France and Iraq and Permanent Delegate to the Council of Europe. He was Undersecretary of State in charge of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization from 1992 to 1998. Mr. Köksal has served in several posts at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including as Deputy Director General in charge of Multilateral Economic Relations, Deputy Permanent Delegate to the EEC, Director of the Middle East and Africa Department, and Director of the Policy Planning Department. Mr. Köksal has served as the President of the Board of Trustees of the Istanbul Commerce University and as a member of the academic staff at Işık University. He served as a Board Member of Global Relations Forum between 2009 and 2016. He is currently a member of Global Relations Forum and of the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies in İstanbul.

Mr. Köksal is a graduate of the Faculty of Political Sciences of Ankara University.

Ayşe Yüksel Mahfoud

Ayşe Yüksel Mahfoud is a member of the Global Executive Committee of Norton Rose Fulbright, a global law firm with over 4,000 lawyers. She is a corporate lawyer with extensive experience in a range of corporate transactions, including mergers and acquisitions, private equity investments, privatizations, joint ventures, and financing transactions.

Ayşe regularly represents companies, private equity funds, sovereign wealth and other investment funds, and financial institutions in cross-border transactions, specifically in Turkey, the Middle East, and North Africa. Her industry experience includes the telecommunications, media, technology, retail, energy, and infrastructure sectors.

Chambers Global ranked Ayşe as an Expert Based Abroad in the categories of USA Corporate/M&A and USA Banking & Finance. She has also been listed as Corporate/M&A: International/Foreign Expert; Turkey Banking & Finance: Foreign Expert; and Central & Eastern Europe Projects & Energy: Key Individual. *The American Lawyer* named her in its global “45 Under 45” list of the “best of the best” among young women lawyers in The Am Law 200. Ayşe was also lauded by the *New York Business Journal* as one of their 2018 Women of Influence, and recognized by *Crain’s New York Business* among its “Notable Women in Law” in 2019.

Özdem Sanberk

Ambassador Özdem Sanberk is a graduate of the Law Faculty of Istanbul University. As a career diplomat, he served in Madrid, Amman, Bonn, and Paris. Advisor to Prime Minister Turgut Özal between 1985 and 1987, he was the Turkish Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the EU in Brussels between 1987 and 1991. From 1991 to 1995, he was Permanent Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara. From 1995 to 2000, Mr. Sanberk served as the Turkish Ambassador to London. Following his retirement in 2000, he was Director of the Turkish Economic and Social Foundation (TESEV) in İstanbul until 2003. He is the author of several articles on foreign policy and a commentator and broadcaster in the press. Mr. Sanberk was the Director of the former International Strategic Studies Center (USAK) in Istanbul until 2016 and was one of the four members of the UN Panel of Inquiry into the Flotilla incident of 31 May 2010. Özdem Sanberk is married to Sumru Sanberk, with one daughter and two grandchildren.

Füsun Türkmen

Füsun Türkmen is Professor and Chair at the Department of International Relations at Galatasaray University. A graduate of George Washington University, she has obtained her Ph.D at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, before joining The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) as an international civil servant. Since 1999 she has been teaching the subjects of human rights, international organizations and US foreign policy at Galatasaray University. She is a Salzburg Seminar Fellow, former Executive Committee member of International Political Science Association (IPSA) where she has also chaired the Research Committee on Human Rights. She has also served as the Program Co-Chair of the 2018 IPSA World Congress of Political Science, in Brisbane, Australia. Currently, she is the President of the Turkish Political Science Association and President of the International Network of the Senghor Chairs of Francophony.

Yaşar Yakış

Mr. Yaşar Yakış is a retired Ambassador and former Turkish Foreign Minister. Born in 1938, he studied political science and joined the diplomatic service in 1962. He served in various capacities in Antwerp, Lagos, Rome, Brussels, and Damascus. Mr. Yakış became Ambassador to Riyadh in 1988, Deputy Undersecretary at the Foreign Ministry in 1992, Ambassador to Cairo in 1995, and Permanent Representative of Turkey to the UN Office in Vienna in 1998.

He has served as an instructor at Bilkent and Hacettepe universities and taught on “Turkish Foreign Policy” and “Water Diplomacy”. His political career began when he retired in 2000 and became a founding member and Deputy Chairman of the Justice and Development Party. He was elected Member of Parliament in 2002 and served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2002 and 2003. He also participated as a government representative in the European Convention that drafted the European Constitution, and chaired the EU Committee and the French Caucus in the Turkish Parliament from 2003 to 2011.

Mr. Yakış was an Associate Member of St Antony’s College in Oxford University for one academic year (2012-2013), and has been bestowed the following decorations: the Decoration of King Abdulaziz (First Degree) by Saudi Arabia; the Legion d’Honneur (Officier) by France; the Ordine della Stella della Solidarieta Italiana (Commendatore) by Italy; and the Grand Croix de l’Ordre de Leopold II by Belgium. Mr. Yakış speaks fluent French, English, and Arabic.

Nigar Aġaoġulları Yalınkılıç

Nigar Aġaoġulları Yalınkılıç, the Executive Director of Global Relations Forum, joined GRF in 2009 as a Program Director and has coordinated GRF’s Task Forces on Energy and Security as well as GRF’s Track-II projects with Russia. Ms. Yalınkılıç graduated from Georgetown University in 2002 with a B.S. degree (cum laude) in Foreign Affairs, concentrating in Culture & Politics as well as Minorities, and completed a certificate program in Muslim-Christian Relations. She holds an M.Sc. degree (merit) in Social and Public Communication from the London School of Economics with specializations in Corporate Communications and Social Psychology.

Before Ms. Yalınkılıç started her career at an international law firm in New York, she worked at the Western Policy Center in Washington, DC, and at the Turkish Mission to the UN. Prior to joining GRF, she specialized in strategy and business development and served as a communication consultant to several companies. Ms. Yalınkılıç is fluent in Turkish and English, and conversational in French and Greek.

Ezgisu Biber

Ezgisu Biber was born in Ankara, Turkey in 1988. She obtained her B.A. degree in Social and Political Sciences from Sabancı University in 2011, and her M.A. degree in International Affairs and International Economics, with a concentration in Conflict Management, from the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in 2013. As one of the first GRF ‘Young Scholars,’ she completed an internship at GRF. She also interned at the Center for Turkish Studies of the Middle East Institute (MEI) in Washington, DC, prior to working as a Project Assistant for one of the projects conducted by MEI in Gaziantep, Turkey. She then worked as an International Relations Expert at the Union of Black Sea and Caspian Business (BCB), an initiative of the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD).

Between 2014 and 2017, she worked as Program Director at GRF, where she assumed various responsibilities including director and rapporteur of the Middle East and North Africa Task Force, coordinator of the roundtable series on the Rule of Law, Institutions, and Development, and co-coordinator of the Young Global Program. She is fluent in Turkish, English and French.

Selin Uğurtaş

Selin Uğurtaş was born in Izmir, Turkey, in 1990. She obtained her B.A. in International Relations from Koç University in 2010 and completed her M.A. degree at King’s College London in 2013 with a full scholarship from the Jean Monnet Program. During her time in London, she worked as a Volunteer Media Advisor for the Engaging Turkey Initiative at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and completed a research internship at the Democratic Progress Institute (DPI). Upon returning to Turkey, she worked as an instructor at Istanbul Bilgi University before starting work at Hürriyet Daily News as an editor. Since 2016, she has been working as a Program Director at Global Relations Forum, where she is director of the Task Force on the Future of EU-Turkey Relations and editor of the Young Academics Program. Selin is also a Fellow of the Turkey Europe Future Forum.

Global Relations Forum (GRF) is an independent, non-profit membership association committed to being a platform for engaging, informing, and stimulating its members and all interested individuals in all matters related to international affairs and global issues.

GRF was founded with the support of 40 accomplished Turkish men and women who have assumed prominent roles in international fora and have received international recognition for their efforts throughout their careers. Founding members include former secretaries of state, university presidents, members of the armed forces, bureaucrats, and retired ambassadors as well as leading business leaders, scholars, artists, legal practitioners, and journalists. It was officially registered on May 11, 2009 and its first General Assembly was held on November 9, 2009.

GRF intends to advance a culture that rewards the fertile tension between passion for intellectual diversity and dedication to innovative and objective synthesis. It nurtures uninhibited curiosity, analytic inquiry, rational debate, and constructive demeanor as the elemental constituents in all its endeavors. It contributes to the shared understanding of and aspiration for humanity's path to peace, prosperity, and progress as an accessible, inclusive, and fair process for all.

GRF's current activities include: conducting Task Forces and Track-II Studies; hosting Roundtable Meetings and Distinguished Guest Speakers Series; fostering cooperation with global counterparts and organizing community programs that engage university students, young academics, and young professionals in topics related to the global agenda.

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Ambassador (R); Former Undersecretary of Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Nigar Ağaogulları Yalınkılıç

Executive Director, GRF

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Partner-in-Charge of the Istanbul Office & Global Executive Committee Member of Norton Rose Fulbright

Fusun Türkmen

Professor of International Relations at Galatasaray University

Selin Uğurtaş

Program Director, GRF

Global Relations Forum
Yapı Kredi Plaza D Blok Levent
34330 Istanbul, Turkey
T: +90 212 339 71 51
F: +90 212 339 61 04
www.gif.org.tr

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GLOBAL İLİŞKİLER FORUMU GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM