

DARK GEOPOLITICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

How the Region's Autocrats and Foreign Intruders Created Growing Disorder

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A third wave of geopolitics has been making its way into Middle East political geography since the end of the Cold War. The first wave began with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. The second wave followed World War II, when the European colonial order crumbled. The third wave will reach its apex with the demise of the American order in the region and the spread of political disarray. The contemporary Middle East is the product of these three geopolitical waves. Among the consequences is the rise of the extremist group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Geopolitics is the intersection of geography, power, and foreign policy, and it often focuses on the states, peoples, borders, resources, environments, trade routes, and human traffic. In the transition to a new geopolitics, these factors become gradually reconfigured and they assume floating realities, differing directions, and varying significance. The key features of the emergent third wave of Middle East geopolitics are failed states, humiliated peoples, crippled economies, extreme inequality and poverty, devastated environments, plundered resources, conflicted geographies, foreign intrusions, and violent radicalism.

The Middle East is where ancient civilizations and three major religions developed, making it a crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia for many centuries. The region has been an intersection of people, trade, and ideas. It has been the locale of numerous progressive developments such as scientific discoveries, giving rise to the Persian, Arab, and Ottoman empires. During Islam's Golden Age, scholars from around the world would gather in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate, to exchange knowledge and translate the known sciences into Arabic.

The resource-rich Middle East proved an attractive prize for outside powers, including Europeans,

▷ Ceremony for withdrawal
of American troops from Iraq,
Baghdad, Dec. 15, 2011.
Mario Tama/Getty Images



Russians, and Americans, particularly since the discovery of oil in the Persian Gulf at the beginning of the twentieth century. Colonial Europe, imperial Russia, and capitalist America have at various times and with varying degrees of success dominated the region. Their rivalries, an iteration of the Great Game, left a lasting and, more often than not, devastating impact on Middle East states and politics, peoples, environments, resources, and economies. The region's authoritarian rulers, often the stooges of foreign powers, share responsibility for the plight of the Middle Eastern peoples.

Ottomans and Colonialists

The first wave of Middle East geopolitics was triggered a century ago with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the last Islamic global power, in World War I by European powers including Britain, France and Italy. A new dispensation arrived for Arabs, who had been a marginal population within the empire. While accepting the Ottoman Turks as fellow Muslims, Arabs had little interaction with them and intermarriage was rare. The empire was a multiethnic state based on loyalty to the ruling dynasty, not on a shared national identity. Even before the Ottoman collapse, Arabs had started identifying themselves as a distinct national group rather than as subjects of the empire. In Egypt, Arabic displaced Turkish as the language of the local government and the governing elite. When the nationalistic ideas of the Turks arose in the final years of the empire, Arabs likewise developed their thinking about national identity and independence.

Embracing Arab nationalism, and with the support of Britain, Arabs thus revolted against the Ottomans in the midst of World War I. They did not care to defend the Ottomans against the “infidel” European forces, who meanwhile claimed to support Arab independence and bring justice to their homelands. In 1914, the Ottomans declared jihad, or holy war, against Britain and France, yet the Arab Muslims, eager for independence, were not swayed.

However, the Europeans did not keep their promises. They redrew the Middle East map based on the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which did not fulfill the plan for Arab independence. Instead, Britain and France colonized the Arabs as well as the Kurds, and mistreated them worse than their Ottoman overlords had ever done. Arab Muslims were left humiliated by non-Muslims. They became the subjects of domineering European powers. The region was chopped up into small states with unnatural borders and heterogeneous geographies and cultures. These new states would isolate families, divide ethnic groups and religious sects, and redraw the map of natural resources such as important waterways. Local orders were dismantled, traditional economies destroyed, cultures demonized, resources plundered, and politics corrupted.

In time, World War II led to the collapse of the European colonial order in the Middle East. Europeans had transformed their colonies into artificial and conflicting nation states to be ruled by local dictators whom the Europeans had nurtured. The invented border configurations, largely straight lines, had no historical basis or even geographical logic. The only logic was political: plant the seeds of future conflicts and thereby divide and rule. The nation-state concept was a European one hardly applicable to the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire. The groups or tribal leaders who won control from the Europeans made sure that they would hold on to power as long as they could.

This transition from colonialism to neocolonialism and dictatorship would serve both local rulers and foreign powers. The European approach to forming new nations all but guaranteed that the Middle East and North Africa region would become and remain a conflict-ridden territory. The inter-state, inter-ethnic, and inter-sectarian fights today are direct products of the European policy of divide and rule as well as a top-down nation-building strategy that crippled citizenship and civil society development.

However, in the years following World War II the region became increasingly unmanageable for the weakened colonial powers. Liberation movements sprung up in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran. Pan-Arabism became a major political force, culminating in the union of Egypt and Syria in the United Arab Republic from 1958 to 1961. This anti-colonialist Arabism, along with the revolutionary populism of Nasserism and Baathism, contributed to the Suez Crisis, which would come to symbolize the end of Britain's role as a world power.

The second wave of geopolitics, in the context of the Cold War, then emerged. As Europeans gradually withdrew from the region, the United States and the Soviet Union filled the vacuum. The struggle between the two emergent superpowers of the capitalist and socialist blocs took form in Iran immediately after the end of World War II. In 1945, while British troops withdrew from the country, there were signs that Moscow would not comply with a March 1946 deadline to also withdraw its troops from Iran. The Soviets finally complied after an American ultimatum and lengthy negotiations with the Iranian government. In a dramatic manifestation of Cold War maneuvering, in 1953 the United States and Britain organized a coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in response to his government's nationalization of the Iranian oil sector.

The Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s divided the Arab World between pro-Western Arab monarchies including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, pre-1958 Iraq, and non-Arab Iran, and the pan-Arab and Islamic socialist states such as Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Libya, North Yemen, and post-1958 Iraq. As the Cold War split the Middle East along an East-West line, oil was emerging as the most significant global energy resource, and the local economies gradually became dependent on oil rent. The most

significant regional development was the formation of the State of Israel and the resulting first major Arab-Israeli war. The United States then assumed the custody of oil, Israel, and the moderate Arab states, as the Soviet Union buttressed the populist and nationalist forces in the region. This was the beginning of ideology-centered geopolitics in the Middle East.

In this bipolar world, oil rent became a curse, as it led to extreme class divides between a minority super-rich and a majority super-poor, with a small but growing middle class besieged in between. Oil also led to large military and luxury purchases, uneven urbanization and environmental wastes, and growing dictatorship and corruption of the dependent and largely weak states. The Arab-Israeli conflict exacerbated external interventions and local distresses caused by war and human displacement.

Under these conditions, Arab and Muslim reassertion took the form of several nationalist and populist coups, and a struggle against Israel. However, these movements failed to evict the imperial powers, defeat Israel, or deliver the promise of justice, freedom, and independence sought by the growing middle and working classes. The military defeats and loss of lands to the Jewish state became a source of frustration, anger, and ultimately humiliation. In the face of defeat and despair, a culture of victimization emerged in the Arab World.

Contributing to the humiliation, Orientalism was promoted in Western policy circles, academia, and media, exaggerating and distorting the differences between Arab peoples and cultures and those of the West. Arabs and Muslims were viewed as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous. For many years the thinking of Western scholars was dominated by the idea that Arabs are not ready for democracy, and are indeed even incapable of living under democratic rule. The racism and stereotyping went so far as to claim that there was an “Arab mind” bent on rejectionism, fundamentalism, and terrorism. Cultural demonization complemented the Western economic domination and murderous political humiliation; while Britain was seizing control of Arab oil resources, for example, France was killing a million Algerians.

Worse, Arabs and Muslims were also humiliated by their own corrupt, inept, or ignorant rulers—dictators and populists alike. These rulers, many of whom had been nurtured and supported by outside powers, made the national state their private property, extended their rule to lifelong terms, and limited elite circulation to their immediate families, allies, and stooges. They created oligarchic economies, mismanaged the country, and misappropriated the public budget and wealth.

Middle Eastern rulers, aided by foreign powers, destroyed all nationalist, reformist, and socialist opposition. In Iran, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, supported by the United States and Britain, crippled the nationalist and leftist movements. In the Arab World, the Six-Day War of 1967 ended with Israel’s military defeat of the anti-West

camp, including Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, leading to the humiliation of Arab nationalists and the death of pan-Arabism. The U.S. invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003 destroyed the last vestiges of Arab nationalism.

Islamist movements, however, survived the efforts of Middle Eastern rulers and their foreign allies to eliminate opposition. In Syria, while then-President Hafez Al-Assad dismantled the Syrian Cultural and Social Forum, which sought a secular, socialist, democratic state, he failed to annihilate the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and its various youth organizations. In 1979, the Muslim Brotherhood's military wing massacred several hundred Syrian officers near Aleppo, most of whom were members of the minority Alawite religious sect of the Al-Assad family. When cracks began developing in the dictatorships in the late 1970s, only Islamists could quickly emerge and assume leadership. In the Arab World, as well as in Iran and Afghanistan, Islamist forces became radicalized and set the stage for the third wave of Middle East geopolitics.

Refuge in Religion

Across the Islamic World the radicalization of Islamists occurred quite unevenly. Generally speaking, where pre-Islamic civilizations existed, such as in Iran, Turkey, and Egypt, extremism was contained as the humiliated Muslims sought glory in their distant pasts. This was not the case for most Arab Muslims who lacked pre-Islamic civilization. To counter humiliation they took refuge in Islamic teachings and culture. Islamic fundamentalism is perhaps best defined as a desire to return to Islam's Golden Age, when most other regions of the world, including Europe, were in decline.

During the Golden Age, the Islamic World was ruled by a caliphate, enjoyed political superiority, and made important advances in science and philosophy. Jihadist groups such as ISIS seek a unified Islamic state, a restoration of the caliphate. They view the Western powers and Arab dictators as obstacles to this objective, and are prepared to use violence against them. In a suffocating political environment, and feeling culturally demonized by the West, their quest to return to Islam's past glory led to a politics of reaction and extremism. Jihadist groups have primarily targeted local authorities and Western powers, whom they see as the perpetrators of their humiliation.

ISIS is inspired by religion, finding an ideological foundation in principles derived from Salafism (a return to original Islam) and Wahhabism (the unity of God). Muhammad Bin Abdul Wahhab was a scholar of the conservative Hanbali school of Islam. He believed that only the Qur'an and the Sunna are the true sources of Islamic law, unlike other schools that accept collective scholarly reasoning (*ijma*) or individual analogical reasoning (*qiyas*). While ISIS justifies violence on the basis of narrow religious doctrine, its prime motivation seems essentially political—a drive for territory,

resources, trade routes, and human traffic, as well as dignity, identity, independence, and self-preservation. It uses religion to advance a political cause, aimed at reversing humiliation and regaining an idealized past, rather than the other way around.

The conflict with Islamic extremism has no military solution. ISIS is a movement with the political goal of overcoming the humiliation that Muslims have suffered at the hands of foreign powers and local dictators. ISIS draws on religious ideology, nostalgia for a glorious past, deep-rooted societal impairments and psychological outrage against violations of sacred or moral values. As long as the root causes remain, movements like ISIS will feed on them. A case in point is that America's self-congratulatory killing of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden did nothing to prevent the rise of ISIS, an Al-Qaeda offshoot, from the ashes.

The challenge posed by Islamic extremism is likely to be complicated by any number of other factors as the Middle East grapples with the third wave of geopolitics. ISIS and other groups will benefit from the coming demise of American global power and the diminishing interest of the United States in the Middle East. The surge in U.S. domestic oil production through shale extraction and other technological means makes the United States less dependent on Persian Gulf oil—a dependency that for decades has been a vital U.S. national interest that justified the projection of military power in the region. America's bitter and costly experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya make Washington reluctant to remain directly involved in the region. Instead, the Obama doctrine uses drone attacks and airstrikes to fight terrorists, and sells arms to regional states to balance one against the other. American policy also calls for a so-called pivot to Asia, whose growing economies offer opportunities for huge trade deals.

No other major power, whether it be Russia, China, the European Union, or even the United Nations, is willing or able to fill the gap that will be left by America's retreat. Russia is already involved in supporting the Al-Assad regime in Syria, and seeks to become a bigger player in the Middle East. But neither other Arab states nor Washington welcomes an expanded Russian role.

Perhaps equally disturbing is the fact that no foreign power is willing to acknowledge the causes of rising extremism and embark on a workable solution. Domestic and foreign powers continue with authoritarian and militaristic policies, as witnessed in the violent suppression of the Arab Spring and the purely military approach to dealing with the challenge from ISIS. Military sales and regime security were the main items on the agenda when President Barack Obama hosted leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries at a Camp David summit meeting in May. Rather than more arms sales, the Middle East needs benevolent foreign powers, patriotic leaders, democratic politics, and balanced economic development.

Another complicating factor is the likely emergence of a tripartite struggle for the region as Iranians, Turks, and Arabs seek to revive past glories. Iranians will increasingly turn to chauvinistic Persianism, Turks to jingoistic Ottomanism, and Arabs to intemperate Islamism. Before the Arab uprisings in 2011, Iran and Saudi Arabia were already engaged in a new regional Cold War, with the Saudis aligned with Egypt, Jordan, and the Arab Gulf states, and Iran with Syria as well as with the Palestinian and Lebanese Shia factions, Hamas and Hezbollah. Saudi-Iranian relations further deteriorated into proxy wars amid evolving political crises in Bahrain, Syria, Iraq, and eventually Yemen.

Turkey's intervention in Syria against the Al-Assad government, in turn, has worsened its already strained relations with Iran. The biggest danger is that their geopolitical rivalry will erupt into a struggle over competing versions of Islam. Turkey's Sunni government wishes to be a key player in the Islamic World, while the Shia government in Iran is opposed to such a role for Turkey or other Sunni states. Kurdish nationalists may seek to exploit the rivalry in their quest for independence, which in turn would threaten the territorial integrity of both Turkey and Iran. The tripartite struggle poses a greater risk of chaos in the region than the existing Sunni-Shia split, with its potential to fuel discord among Sunnis and widen the gulf between extremist and moderate Muslims.

As old conflicts continue and new ones emerge, they may assume troubling new dimensions. Domestic turmoil will increasingly pit the younger generation of the educated middle class against the authoritarian state, relations between the poor and the rich will become more antagonistic, and secular and religious forces will become estranged. As states begin to fail, regimes will call foreign powers to the rescue, a move that will further complicate domestic politics in the region. A new era of foreign intervention carries the risk of greater destabilization, as the crisis in Syria illustrates.

The Way Forward

The new geopolitics of the Middle East will be characterized by failed states, political chaos, popular revolt, religious extremism, inter-state conflict, foreign rivalries, and military interventions. Countries of the region will be left plundered, their social systems twisted and dehumanized, their environments ruined, their cities and towns vacated by citizens migrating to safer places. In such a dark scenario, a condition of despair will prevail and extremist groups and their rivals, struggling for self-preservation, will scar the Middle Eastern landscape.

The trajectory of these disastrous developments can and must change. The causes of the Middle East catastrophe must be fully understood and addressed. Autocratic rulers and foreign powers must bear responsibility. For too long they have worked, whether together or in opposition, to suppress popular demands for political reform,

ruin economies, provoke regional conflict, and humiliate beleaguered populations. Ideologies, religion in particular, have promoted obliviousness and intolerance; they and their institutions must be reformed or else replaced by new drivers of change, namely the young generations.

At the global level, the international community must come together in supporting the end of dictatorship, corruption, and monopolistic practices in favor of democratic rule, transparency, and a free market system. Foreign powers must reduce their negative interference, including arming dictatorial regimes, in favor of positive mediation and coalition building. They must openly advocate political and economic reforms and provide practical and peaceful support, logistical and financial, for nationalist and democratic forces.

They must also refrain from coercive diplomacy in favor of engagement, advancing economic cooperation, protecting regional environments, and promoting sustainable democratic development. A strengthened UN role in democratic change and economic development *à la* the Marshall Plan, focused on the middle class and the working people, may be required. Other international organizations should also become involved in the promotion of democracy in the region. Connecting economies of these countries to the global economy will diminish Islamic extremism. International NGOs can play a more active part in strengthening democratic institutions.

At the regional level, there must be concrete attempts to reform failed regimes or force them into retirement in favor of new democratic leaderships. The Arab Spring and the earlier Green Movement in Iran failed because democratic and nationalist forces are too weak to stand on their own. Such movements need unconditional outside support and the development of domestic fronts. All states in the region must be encouraged to become legitimate, sovereign, and cooperative.

At the national level, multiple reforms must be instituted from the top and secured by public participation at the bottom. These should include democratizing local politics, developing the economy, leveling income distribution, mitigating poverty, eliminating repressive social restrictions on youth and women, and protecting religious and ethnic minorities. Without courageous steps, the future is bleak for the peoples of the Middle East.

Finally, while authorities at the international, regional and national levels have a responsibility to effect significant positive changes in the objective (economic and political) conditions of the Muslim and Arab masses, the scholarly and journalistic communities must also help alter their subjective (identity and culture) conditions that are so badly demonized and damaged by Orientalism and racism. These terrible ideologies must be dispelled if Muslims and Arabs are to regain dignity. Unless dignity is returned to these communities, there will be no way forward to a better Middle East.