

SPRING 2020 / ISSUE NO.16

\$ 15.00 | € 10.00 | 1500 RSD

# HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## PANDEMICS & GEOPOLITICS THE QUICKENING



**UNLOCKING  
THE MIDDLE EAST**

**SUSTAINABLE  
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# TOWARDS A BETTER MIDDLE EAST

*Nabil Fahmy*

**T**HE MIDDLE EAST today, with the Arab world at the center, faces a situation of tremendous flux with numerous signs of friction, conflict, instability, and human suffering—unprecedented perhaps since the post-World War II era. Anyone who has attempted political conflict resolution in the region, or truly believes in societal change, would, however, understand that even in the best of circumstances, where no serious resistance exists, all this requires a fundamental socio-political evolution that is time-consuming. No Middle East expert, or true advocate of reform in the region, would expect quick conclusive and sustainable results, which requires capacity building, changing practices, and even overhauling the political culture.

Egypt has been in an extended state of transition, and grudgingly so, since

1952—not 2011, as some analysts claim. Throughout almost seven decades, it has fought three full-fledged wars and faced serious challenges in determining a coherent socio-economic policy, while repeatedly shifting its social contract. Domestically, it has faced many serious questions, well beyond the traditional ones about economic policy. It has inconclusively deliberated on the role of religion in society, on how to reestablish a sustained culture of pluralistic politics, with an effective accountable system of governance that provides social equity, economic prosperity, security, and stability, as well as on how to preserve a space for the military in a civilian state commensurate with contemporary governance.

**I**nternationally, Egypt has engaged friend and foe from all over the political stratosphere. It succeeded

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in liberating its territory and stood on principle, joining the liberation of Kuwait, combated terrorism but for specific reasons, some beyond its own control, failed to witness a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace.

The travail and continuous turmoil in the Middle East have negatively affected Egypt's strongest calling card, which is its position as a pioneer and spearhead of centrism, moderation, and modernity, which the international community should invest in and depend upon.

The challenges that Egypt faced have accentuated since 2010. The Arab revo-

lutionary awakening was, in essence, an expression of political rejection of past practice—mostly domestic practices that did not provide social equity, prosperity, and security to the Arab people: the three fundamental and common objectives of all nations. Despite past failures, these goals remain achievable if domestic, regional, and global dynamics allow for and encourage transformation.

## **SYNDROME AND DEFICIENCY**

**T**he reasons for the turbulence in the Arab world are numerous. The paramount generic domestic one, irrespective of the problem, discipline, or domain, is a “Resistance to Change

Syndrome.” Change is inevitable. Since I came to age in the late 1960s, many unforeseen opportunities and challenges emerged. The communication capacities worldwide today are just one example of changes with implications that have redefined the economic and political paradigm of the world. They have even brought into question the concepts of power and sovereignty, previously defined by material assets and formal borders.

Stability is a natural national aspiration for any government. It cannot, however, be achieved through the rejection of natural processes of incremental change. Domestic resistance to change, whether in governmental or nongovernmental positions of authority, is a source of stagnation and inefficient governance because surrounding circumstances, technologies, aspirations, and interests are in a constant state of flux. In addition, this tendency is normally coupled with those in authority resisting accountability and transparency increasing the list of unresolved problems, which fuel unfulfilled aspirations and built-up frustrations. To ensure stability, along with progress, nations must embrace incremental change in all systems that affect society.

The unique complexities we are facing, and the level of turbulence associated with these awakenings, were also exacerbated by the geopolitical

competition in the region, which, in effect, not only made domestic but also foreign players consequential in our domestic problems. More frequently than not, this has been at the expense of Arab interests as a result of a “National Security Capacity Deficiency” in comparison with non-Arab members of the region.

Arab countries from the Atlantic, through North Africa to the Levant, and down to the Arab Gulf, at different points of time, have invariably made the mistake of becoming highly dependent on one or the other major superpower for their security. Even the more politically and militarily robust, like my own country Egypt, have fallen into this trap with the Soviet Union and then the United States again.

On the other hand, by carefully calibrating domestic capabilities and foreign support, non-Arab states—Turkey, Israel, and Iran—have been able to preserve their national security alliances, while enhancing their own robust national security capacities at the same time.

Ensuring security against existential threats by accepting the security support of a superpower or substantial regional player is justifiable. Kuwait would not have been liberated from Saddam Hussein’s invasion in 1990 without the American-led international alliance.

However, becoming overly dependent can lead to national security complacency, and encourage regional adversaries to become more adventurous, given that superpowers will have their own set of priorities and calculations before intervening and, more often than not, will only do so in existential circumstances.

I believe that the “Resistance to Change Syndrome” and the “National Security Capacity Deficiency” are the two most important reasons for the Arab awakenings, having occurred and caused destabilization. Resisting evolution resulted in revolutions. I would add, without any hesitation, that the Middle East will only get better when we find a remedy to this syndrome and overcome this deficiency.

Domestic transformations in the Arab world have indeed begun, albeit still with a lot of challenges. Things may get better or worse, but there will be no return to the past even if dreams of a democratic future are not immediately or easily realized. There are many indications that rampant poor governance will no longer be accepted or condoned, and one can see this in the public discourse in Arab media. In addition, even as we witness

a re-centralization of authority, it is publicly promoted as a tool to better provide public goods and services, which confirm that public accountability, cannot be ignored.

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Much remains to be done. To begin with, each of the Arab states must consensually develop a socio-political identity with widespread national support that is inclusive and consistent with the norms and standards of the twenty-

first century. Since 1952, Egypt has essentially had a stable republican state structure. However, with every change of leadership, constituencies were pitted against each other, the marginalized and less affluent against the economically more fortunate, or supporters of private money against supporters of public ownership, or seculars against Islamists, or the youth against the old guard. These polarizing practices were, regrettably, frequently replicated throughout the Arab world.

Sound socioeconomic policies must also be adopted. Public spending in the Arab world, the traditional engine of development, has reached its limit, and the public sector can no longer absorb the number of university graduates. However, countries in the region have a large, well-educated youth population

that, by global standards, has widely adopted digital and mobile technologies. This can provide a good reason for optimism as a catalyst for future growth and job creation if complemented with astute macro-socio-economic policies.

**LEARNING SOCIETIES**

There is, however, a simultaneous need for Arab countries to become “learning societies”—particularly in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields—and to create a vibrant digital service economy with a technologically capable labor force. Moreover, education systems should encourage greater openness to entrepreneurship and require students to hone their critical thinking as well as managerial skills within collaborative work arrangements.

To sustain this, the digital economy will need technical infrastructure, including expanded broadband internet access and the availability of payment systems that are not just easy to use and widely available but also trustworthy. For this to occur, governments will also need to develop an approach to regulation that encourages, rather than stifles, innovation. There is a tremendous opportunity and positive potential here, but policymakers will need to work on multiple fronts to overcome economic exclusion and realize their full potential.

Economic vitality can be the engine towards prosperity, but immediate dire social challenges cannot be ignored and need to be addressed. I suggest creating an Arab social services fund that would provide matching funds to governments for the provision of basic health, housing, and educational programs. This would help shrink the size of marginalized constituencies as well as dry up significant fertile ground for extremist and terrorist recruitment.

It would also be highly beneficial for the Arab world to adopt a regional document on citizenship, highlighting the basic equality of rights and privileges for all, without discrimination on ethnic, religious, or any other basis, in order to preserve and consolidate the national identity of each of its member states.

The United Nations 2016 Arab Human Development Report reveals that Arab youth between the ages of 15 and 29 constitute nearly a third of the region’s population. Another third is below the age of 15. Even though the younger generations are increasingly better educated, youth unemployment rates in the Arab world have risen to almost 30 percent, twice the global average of 16 percent. Sclerotic economies are unable to accommodate and make use of the vast amounts of human capital atrophying in the Arab world.

The 2016 Arab Youth Survey reveals that there seems to be little appeal for extremist groups and their twisted interpretation of Islam among the youth.

Nevertheless, many young people believe that without job opportunities and space for political expression, marginalization and frustration may increasingly be a source of tension and instability and might be an important factor in recruitment for terrorists and extrem-

ists. Youth, therefore, are an invaluable asset that should be seriously invested in because they are really the ballast of a better future. To achieve this, the fulfillment of their aspirations is a challenge that must be met.

**PROACTIVE DIPLOMACY**

Despite impressions to the contrary, Arab states continue to have more in common than ways in which they differ. Their historic legacy and shared cultural values should not be underestimated. A cooperative path forward is paramount if truly sustainable progress in the Arab world is to be achieved. In essence, Arab states must individually and jointly become more proactive diplomatically. The alternative, further diminution of Arab political weight, will prove disastrous to the region in this time of transition.

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It is imperative that the Arab states approach the changing world in wide-ranging agreement with the intention to continue building pluralistic, inclu-

sive governments and reorienting their foreign policy away from excessive international dependency.

Traditional Pan-Arabism is neither feasible nor no longer desirable. The twenty-first-century mantra should be about constructive collabora-

tion between independent sovereign states in the Arab world, creating a citizen identity that is responsive to national needs, taking full advantage of regional shared advantages, and consistent with modern norms. Moreover, in terms of leadership of the Arab world, it will not be about legacy but about the ability to cooperate with others in the region towards common objectives.

In many ways, over the last half-century, just as the world has become multipolar, the Arab world itself has expanded to include the older and larger states of Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. The younger smaller states of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman have also shown an ability to influence regional developments, positively and negatively. Neither can act alone any longer no matter how strong

or wealthy, nor independently lead the pack if a significant number of other Arab countries are not on board.

Arab countries, such as Syria and Iraq, have faced grave challenges after years of domestic injustice and foreign interference that have transformed into sectarian conflicts questioning the social coherence of once-proud civilizations. The very sustainability of the nation-state system in the Arab world, especially in the Levant, is now being questioned in favor of ethnic cultural, religious, sectarian identities that would wreak havoc on the state system, security, and stability not only in the Levant but also in the Gulf area with dangerous geopolitical implications.

Partially, as a result of these dangerous trends, the Middle East has also witnessed a geopolitical imbalance in favor of non-Arab countries in the region—especially Turkey, Iran, and Israel. Each of them poses a different unique challenge to the Arab world, from influence on insurgency to occupation. Another important and alarming factor to take into account is the emergence of dangerous non-state actors, particularly terrorist groups such as the Islamic

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State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Al-Nusra Front. These groups are essentially homegrown; terrorism in the Middle East is a direct derivative of the breakdown of the social contract and the absence of effective state institutions. But these non-state actors, in different forms and with different identities, have managed to transcend borders with terrorist operations on different continents.

Then, of course, there are the regional conflicts and crises whose resolution or perpetuation will be instrumental in defining foreign policy objectives and policies in the years to come. The Arab world is rife with regional, bilateral, and domestic conflicts, from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf. Moroccan-Algerian tensions concerning the dispute over Western Sahara and the role of the Polisario Front remain unresolved. Libya has become a failed state, a fertile ground for extremists and terrorism, with sub-regional ramifications. Syria is a bloody battlefield, in spite of intensive diplomatic efforts sponsored by the United Nations. Iraq, while witnessing progress, is still unsettled, with terrorists able to operate across the border between Iraq and Syria. Conflict continues to consume Yemen; as with

the war in Syria, the fighting there is exacerbating tensions between regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Arab-Israeli conflict, nearly seven decades old, continues to make life unbearable for the Palestinians living under occupation.

In the midst of all this turmoil, Arab diplomacy has been strangely absent. To counter support provided by non-Arab states, some Arab countries had been

providing military support for different protagonists in different conflicts, notably in Libya and Yemen, and in the war against terrorism in Syria and Iraq. Where, however, is Arab diplomacy? The diplomatic efforts are being made in every one of these cases are being led by non-Arabs or non-Arab organizations.

Arabs must look at the security paradigm in the Middle East more holistically—from within nation-state boundaries, to their immediate regional neighbors and beyond to sub-Saharan Africa and to Europe. Like the world itself, the Middle East is changing geopolitically and this needs to be addressed. The challenges ahead for a better future and regional stability are daunting, and this will require rational, proactive, and wise steps by strong and proud Arab states.

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Active Arab diplomacy will be a determining factor in whether the Arab awakenings are a success or a failure. This new approach will also be among the factors in determining the place Arabs will have in the future world order and in determining whether the Middle East will remain a cauldron of violence or proceed toward a more stable future.

The Arab world is amongst the largest arms buyers in the world, reaching an estimate of 11.535 billion dollars in arms purchases in 2017. However, this has not been coupled with enhanced national security capacities amongst Arab countries in terms of hardware, skills, and depth, which has diminished their influence in comparison to that of neighboring non-Arab states in non-existential crises.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

Any attempt to project the future of today's Middle East is risky, if not foolhardy. Nevertheless, strategic planning based on well-considered assumptions is a necessity for policymakers. Domestic pressures in the Middle East will force governments to open up their systems, after initially driving them to overreact with restrictive measures in light of immediate challenges.

Given that the Middle East cannot and should not live in isolation from the global community, the path forward should be navigated by upholding international norms and practicing rational regional realpolitik in crisis management and conflict resolution. Arab and Middle Eastern states will not find stability unless they see and respect international norms, not as an imposition from foreign powers but as a response to the demand of their own people.

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At the same time, sober crisis management and conflict resolution should drive the international community to preserve existing government institutions and respect the sanctity of international borders—even if short-sighted tactical gains may appear attractive and drive opportunistic policies.

No changes should be countenanced with respect to borders, irrespective of how they were originally drawn. Nor should changes involve dismantling institutions at the expense of a country's security and stability. These are roads we cannot afford to travel in the present volatility.

For the region to move forward, there must also be a reorientation of relations between Turkey and Egypt,

as well as between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is difficult to envision Middle Eastern stability with these four major players at loggerheads. Such shifts will prove challenging if not impossible in the short term. As an indication of seriousness, it would be useful to develop a series of preliminary but concrete confidence-building measures by Turkey and Iran that they would refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of their neighbors. Egypt and Saudi Arabia can reciprocate with actions acknowledging greater openness towards the legitimate interests of both countries.

Different regional organizations must be reinvigorated, such as the Arab Military Industrial Corporation, which is based in Egypt and can potentially enhance the national security capacity of different states. The Arab League, particularly in terms of its preventive diplomacy and crisis management capacities, has to redefine itself and break out of the stupor it is in.

My emphasis on reinvigorating proactive Arab diplomacy should not be mistaken for a disregard of the broader international transformations that continue to affect the Middle East. Older European states no longer reign over empires and the

post-World War II bipolar security paradigms first led by the NATO and Warsaw Pact alliances, then by the United States and the Soviet Union, have dissipated.

Both of Washington and Moscow are now moving away from prioritizing strategic “alliance” structures to short-term transactional policies with a decreased appetite for foreign

military engagement as is evident in U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated reference to “America First” as the primary factor governing his international relations. It is also evident in Russian President Vladimir Putin's policies in Syria, which, while militarily engaging, have in mind the dangers of over-extension, driving Russia to actively coordinate with Turkey, Iran, and the Syrian regime, even though these four parties do not have the same long-term goals.

This carries many implications in the Arab world as it strives to ensure its security without having a global enforcer and guarantor to rely on. Thus, it is imperative for the Arab world to diversify its relations with other states internationally rather than depend on a single superpower. They should also give increasing attention to neighboring regions, including sub-Saharan African and Mediterranean countries.

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In addition, relations must be strengthened with Asian countries. China is the natural point of interest here. Its energy and raw material needs, as well as its interest in market

areas, will grow exponentially. The Belt and Road Initiative and China's substantial investment capacity will raise its profile in the Arab world and make it look increasingly eastwards. The same applies with respect to India and Indonesia although to a lesser degree.

The conclusion from all this is that the Middle East will be even more complicated in the near future before it reaches its natural balance. Arab countries will pursue their foreign policies, regionally and globally, in a different context than in the past. They will preserve strong relations with the West for the near future. However, they will also strive to be less dependent on one foreign source by developing and expanding their relationships internationally. These countries will also strive to enhance their national security capacity in both diplomatic and military security terms and to independently deal with regional issues—especially as the appetite of global players to bear wider security responsibilities has diminished and regional imbalances have expanded.

Lastly, the Arab world needs to confront regional hegemonic attitudes and the illegitimate occupation of Arab lands. Solutions to current problems must respect people's aspirations for statehood and national political identity going beyond tactical or transactional approaches that provide only short-term relief. Ultimately, any policy that fails to protect national rights will not be sustainable and will perpetuate regional conflicts and thus become an obstacle to true security, stability, prosperity, and social cohesion.

**EGYPT'S ROLE**

Egypt should pursue a more temporary foreign policy posture to adequately respond to the different global challenges posed by modern realities in a networked global environment—be they climate change, resource scarcity, xenophobia, or intelligence—which were not paramount when the post-World War II order was established.

To be effective and credible, this foreign policy approach should be strategic and forward-looking. Over the last decade or so, most of the developing world, as well as Egypt, has been playing catch-up on most issues. In addition, policies and positions must be announced clearly, coherently, and consistently as far as possible to avoid misunderstandings.

They must be founded on a solid reservoir of earmarked resources in order to be viable and sustainable with the fundamental transformations occurring.

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In the past, Egypt's political influence in the Arab world, Africa, and the developing world was unquestioned. It seemed to be a foregone conclusion or even an acquired right as a natural extension of the country's long heritage and momentous contributions of the past centuries. The overriding strategic objective for Egypt's future foreign policy will be, however, as much if not more, to provide an enabling environment for the attainment of Egypt's economic needs as to promote regional political priorities and prominence.

This is not to say that Egypt's foreign policy will uniquely pursue domestic economic goals or be driven solely by material needs. The aspirations expressed through Egypt's revolutions demand an activist foreign policy, which seeks not only to regain and strengthen but also to improve upon its historic leadership role and international standing. It is through this process of rejuvenation and assertion that Egypt can create the incentive to attract investors in economic growth and rapid social stability imperative to fulfill domestic goals and priorities.

In this context, a major and daunting challenge in which Egypt will need the help of others in the region and beyond is the fight against terrorism on its soil and nearby. This existential issue can derail any other domestic or foreign policy plans. Fighting terrorism is, of course, primarily the responsibility of the Egyptian army and security forces. However, terrorism is an international and regional phenomenon that knows no borders or frontiers and that takes full advantage of legitimate avenues of communication and resources to achieve criminal objectives. It is also a dangerous scourge that requires multidimensional security, political, and socioeconomic sustained efforts over an extended period.

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However, to preserve its prominent role in the region, Egypt must, most of all, continue to be the bedrock of creative progressive intellect, which necessitates embracing new concepts of modernity and principles of governance that are responsive to the aspirations of all its people. If Egyptians want to play a central role in shaping their country's own future and that of the multiple regions their country is part of, they cannot remain complacent focusing on imminent issues of

the present. They must start planning for the future now.

Personally, I believe that the winds of change in the Arab world, both domestically and regionally, were inevitable. They have created turbulent experiences that remain unsettled almost a decade later. However, they did shake governments and societies out of the state of deafening apathy that has essentially marginalized their role in determining their very own future. Therefore, while challenging and costly in the short and medium terms, the winds of change were inevitable and will be beneficial both now and more so in the future.

Very few countries in the Arab world would have survived two revolutions in three years. Egypt, in terms of the basic parameters of a strong state, human capacity, institution structures, and resiliency capacity, remains among the most stable countries in the Arab world and will continue to have a leadership role. And for Egypt to best succeed it should invest in its strong intellectual richness by embracing the recommendations mentioned as it looks forward in order to rise as the regional nation state others want to emulate even before looking beyond the region. ●