

Current Arab Crisis and Emerging Scenarios

Dr. Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui

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Indian Council of World Affairs
Sapru House, Barakhamba Road,
New Delhi- 110 001, India
Tel. : +91-11-23317242, Fax: +91-11-23322710
www.icwa.in

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Tel. : 9312430311
Email : tarunberi2000@gmail.com

Contents

Abstract	5
Introduction	7
Six Years of Constant Upheaval and its Geostrategic Fallout	10
Timeline	11
The Present Complexities and Emerging Scenarios	36
Possible Future Scenarios in the Arab World	39
Overall Arab Scenario	60
Conclusion	68

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'Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.'

—Albert Einstein.¹

Abstract

Imagining the future has always been a difficult task, still analysts and researchers have endeavoured to offer a projection, particularly on the basis of a major disruptive event taking place at a particular time within a particular context. The nature and dynamics involved in the particular event are informed by certain trends which facilitate the task of discerning the likely implications and forecasting the future. Something similar is true in the case of the Arab world of today too, where imagining some probabilities is not an easy task. What is happening currently in the Arab world is perhaps something which one

1 Florence Gaub and Alexandra Laban (ed.) *Arab Futures: Three Scenarios for 2025*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Report No, 22, February 22, 2015). http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Report_22_Arab_futures.pdf, (accessed 26 October 2016).

had never imagined or predicted – that the self-immolation of a vendor would bring the region at such level of political chaos and anarchy.

The Arab uprising has so far failed to achieve the desired socio-political objectives, cherished by people since the inception of the uprising in 2010. Instead, it has caused death, displacement and disappearance of millions, and engulfed the region into unprecedented levels of sectarian, regional, ideological and class conflicts apart from intensifying the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The current situation in the region is riddled with a novel demonstration of strategic ambition by Turkey, strategic and political consolidation of Israel, unimaginable military involvement and strategic assertion of Russia, and the return of the US and European military forces in the region again.

In the light of the above account, this paper will offer a brief narrative about the current situation and what, possibly, the future holds for the region. The paper will also take into account the trends of the last six years and explain the basis on which several probabilities, if not predictions, about political and strategic future of the Arab world can be discussed. In addition, predicting the course of events is a difficult science generally, and it is especially difficult in a complex zone like the WANA region. No one can predict where the current disorder will lead, essentially when the situation is changing every moment. The present analysis is based on the last six years of random transition witnessed so far, one cannot rule out the possibility of the emergence of a complete opposite scenario to what has been discussed in the present paper.

Introduction

The uprising that swept across the Arab region in the spring of 2011 was rooted in people's demands and aspirations for free democracy, employment opportunities and, moreover, an urge for dignity which had been usurped from them for decades. The march of millions witnessed following a vendor's self-immolation in the tiny town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia was an unprecedented event in the history of modern Arab world, which was suggestive of protracted deprivation suffered by millions in the region. A spark lit in Tunisia dislodged Mr. Mubarak of Egypt, forced the Tunisian President to flee the country, caused the departure of Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and finally led first to the removal and later to the ghastly killing of Libya's Colonel Gaddafi.

The outcome of the surge of millions was something which none including the protestors and the rulers had ever imagined. What happened in the early days of the uprising was something unbelievable because the Arab world, in the political spectrum, had so far witnessed nothing except lifelong autocracy, partial democracy and uncontested acceptance of the illiberal military dictatorship that had become a part of political behavior.

But the euphoria on the streets was very short-lived, as the first elected Islamist government could not survive for long and merely within a year in 2013, it was overthrown in a coup which some analysts dubbed as a civilian coup.² The democracy

2 Marvat Hatem, The Debates on the July 3 Military Coup in Egypt: Is it about much more than definition of coup, Centre for Mellemost Studier, November 3, 2013 <http://static.sdu.dk/mediafiles/3/7/B/%7B37BCEEAA-C02D-4EA0-94DC-3C3F70F67C35%7DMH1113.pdf>, (accessed January 28, 2016).

in Tunisia is visible, but in a very fragile form which has been possible because the Islamist (read Ennehdha Party) made more ideological sacrifices than its counterparts in other transient states like Egypt.³ Meanwhile, nations like Syria, Libya and Yemen took altogether a different trajectory which scuttled the emergence of alternate democratic voices. In addition, the turmoil there has left its imprimatur on the nature of the geostrategic evolution and, even today, the development in these countries is shaping the future of the Arab region.

The transitions in the Arab world following the upheaval have witnessed a few prominent trends which can be marked as non-violent transitions like in Tunisia and Egypt; greater degree of constitutional regime and political freedom, such as in Morocco and Jordan; sustained violence as the regime fought for survival in Syria, Yemen and Libya; and counter-move of the GCC regimes to thwart the revolution.⁴ But very soon, the distinction among these categories blurred and aspirations and hopes of the people for a better future almost diminished.

What has really altered the regional gambit in the wake of the uprising is the conflict in Syria where protest and dissent very

3 David Held and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Arab Spring and the Changing Balance of Global Powers," *Open Democracy*, February 26, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/david-held-kristian-coates-ulrichsen/arab-spring-and-changing-balance-of-global-power>, (accessed 16 November 2016).

4 David Held and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Arab Spring and the Changing Balance of Global Powers," *Open Democracy*, February 26, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/david-held-kristian-coates-ulrichsen/arab-spring-and-changing-balance-of-global-power>, (accessed 16 November 2016).

soon acquired a sectarian dynamics and turned into a war of supremacy in the region between two traditional arch ideological, political and strategic rivals: Saudi Arabia and Iran. The regime in Saudi Arabia was seemingly looking for an opportune moment to alter the geopolitical dynamics ushered in the wake of departure of Saddam Husain in Iraq and removal of Taliban in Afghanistan, providing a new clout to Iran in the region at the cost of Saudi Arabia. Syria was an old strategic ally of Iran and in the removal of President Assad, Saudi's regime was looking for a strategic leverage and, hence, Saudi Arabia began to extend all support to rebel forces, from funding to providing arms to anti-Assad forces. Saudi Arabia is reported to have provided salaries to those defecting from the army of Assad's government.⁵ As the involvement of Saudi Arabia increased, Iran also jumped in, which gradually changed both the course and orientation of the Syrian crisis.

The war for hegemony did not remain confined between the two rivals in the form of Iran and Saudi Arabia or later involvement of Turkey, Qatar and UAE alone, but it also dragged in Russia which had been missing in the strategic calculus of the region for more than two decades. The US was always there and both the US and Russia interlocked themselves in an array of strategic, political and diplomatic squabble in the blood-stained terrain of Syria.

Similarly, the transition in Libya and Yemen has become hostage to the strategic ambitions of the regional rivals and proxies for

5 "Saudi Arabia to Pay Salaries of Syrian Opposition Fighters: Report," *Al-Arabiya News*, June 23, 2012. <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/06/23/222214.html>, on (accessed January 20, 2017).

their masters as both the nations have turned into a zone of tribal, regional, ethnic and sectarian conflict, sabotaging the prospect for political unity and stability.

The democratic aspiration emanating from the Arab uprising has morphed into a regional war for strategic reconfiguration and evolution, which almost every nation in the region has either joined or has been dragged into unwillingly. The impact of the Arab uprising transcended the national system and, today, it is not only affecting the regional political order, but has also brought the region again into the folds of global politics, reminding one of a Cold War era. Different nations are pursuing different interests which has pushed the region to a cross road and made it face different set of challenges both from the neighbors and far flung areas. The perpetual transition in the Arab world has economic, political, social and geostrategic implications. The outcome can provide several alternative versions which might be valuable for some, but harmful for many.

Six Years of Constant Upheaval and its Geostrategic Fallout

The region witnessed a profound geopolitical transformation in the last six years. The Arab world has transitioned from the great hope of democracy towards a spiral of fragmentation, insecurity and fragility. The events over the past six years have left the politics in tumult. The emerging political order is marked by considerable changes within each state, which is impacting the geopolitics of the whole region, a vital region in the global political arena. Security threats and tensions have increased among the states and ushered in direct and indirect conflict

challenging social, political and economic security. The region is witnessing the emergence of a new security order where power and influence are diffused and distributed among state and non-state actors.

Timeline

It seems prudent here to provide a brief and yearly timeline for the events that unfolded over the last six years in the countries, which not only affected the indigenous political trajectory of respective nations, but had major impact on the emerging political and strategic scenario of the regional and global politics.

Year		Major Events
EGYPT		
2011	Anti-regime demonstration across the nation; President Mubarak steps down; SCAF takes over the transitional governance; national referendum held over the nature of the constitution; National Unity government formed under Al-Ganzouri.	
2012	Islamist alliance of FJP and Al-Nour emerges victorious in parliamentary election; constitutional court dissolves the parliament; Mr. Morsi elected President; Islamist-dominated constitutional committee approves draft constitution.	
2013	President Morsi passes decree making himself immune from judicial review; President Morsi is ousted from power after a huge protest and army intervention; Mr. Adley Mansour becomes interim President and a road map is announced; constitution declared nullified; thousands killed in pro-Morsi demonstration, MBH declared a terrorist organization.	
2014	A new constitution is approved in a nation-wide referendum; General El-Sisi becomes President; more than 500 MBH members sentenced to death and another court sentenced more than 600 MBH cadres to death for violence.	

2015	Series of laws passed increasing vigilance against people's political activities; Morsi along with other hundred sentenced to death for inciting violence; a new national Parliament is elected; Prosecutor General killed and a wave of violence hits the country; Russian airliner shot down in Sinai and the ISIS claims the responsibility.
2016	Egypt announced to hand over two strategic Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia, sparking public outrage and unrest; an Egyptian appeal court overturns the death sentence of Morsi.
LIBYA	
2011	Many killed in anti-Qadhafi protest in several towns of Libya; EU announced arms embargo and no-fly zone imposed; UNSC passed resolution Responsibility to Protect; NATO operation Odyssey Dawn began air strikes; Qadhafi killed in operation; National Transition Council recognized as the National Government of Libya.
2012	Intra-tribal and regional clashes on the rise; campaign for autonomy for Benghazi begins and there is a new war for geographical separation between east and west; US envoy to Libya killed; new National Assembly (GNC) is elected and TNC is dissolved.
2013	Prime Minister Ali Zeidan abducted from a hotel in Tripoli by armed militiamen and later replaced because of his failure.
2014	The elections for Constituent Assembly held with marginal participation; the emergence of Haftar a major challenge to the political process; he announces unilateral dissolution of the Libyan National Parliament (GNC) and creates a President's Committee; election held to choose House of Representative; Haftar launched operation Dignity to defeat the Islamists and their group, 'Libya Dawn'; capital town of Tripoli fell to the Dawn, which earlier declared GNC as the only legitimate body; HoR forced to shift its capital to Tabruk.

2015	Tabruk government recognized internationally while Omar Al-Hassi, former GNC member forms the National Salvation Government in Tripoli; several oil fields taken over by the ISIS and a town like Sirte emerges as a major hub of the ISIS; twenty-one Egyptian Coptics killed in Libya and Egypt launches air strike in the town of Dirne; US launches anti-ISIS airstrikes; new political agreement signed in Morocco known as Libyan Political Agreement.
2016	UN-backed Government of National Accord announced and Fayeze el-Sarraj appointed as the Prime Minister; HoR reaches Tripoli but Salvation government refuses to recognize the Sarraj government.
SYRIA	
2011	After large scale protests triggered across the nation, President Assad dismisses the government and ends 48 years old emergency law; Syria suspended from the Arab League and the US and EU tighten sanctions; Free Syrian Army and Syrian National Council become major opposition forces.
2012	UNSC endorses non-binding peace plan prepared by former UN envoy, Kofi Annan; Turkey plane shot down by Syrian air force; around three hundred civilians killed in a chemical attack; National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionaries formed in Qatar; US, Britain, France, Turkey and GCC recognize it as the representative of Syrian people; Kofi Annan appointed UN-Arab League envoy for Syria and later replaced by Lakhdar Brahimi whose peace plan failed; Geneva I fails to end the war in Syria.
2013	The US and UK suspend supply of lethal weapons to the rebel forces; Islamist forces take over areas captured by the western-backed Free Syria Army.

2014	Syrian chemical weapons destroyed under Framework for the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons; UN-brokered Geneva II fails; ISIS declares Caliphate in territories from Aleppo to the city of Diyala; the US along with five nations begins strike against the ISIS.
2015	Russia carries out first air strikes against the ISIS; Vienna peace talk fails.
2016	UN-mediated peace talk in Geneva (Geneva III) fails; Syrian government retakes the city of Palmyra and recaptures the town of Aleppo; Iran, Russia, Turkey meet in Moscow to discuss Syria.
YEMEN	
2011	Thousands come on the street to protest against President Saleh; GCC nations mediate the exit of President Saleh, but violence continues; National Unity government is formed for three months and Vice President Mansour Hadi becomes interim President for two years.
2012	To replace Saleh, Mansour Hadi elected President with more than 99 per cent votes; a new movement for the autonomy of southern Yemen begins.
2013	UN-backed GCC holds a national dialogue with representation of 500 political figures to draft a new constitution.
2014	Rebel Houthis take over the capital town of Sana and force the Prime Minister to resign, but it is rejected by the Parliament.
2015	Yemeni President Hadi resigns in the face of siege of the capital town and his house by the Houthis; President Hadi flees to the southern town of Aden; later, he leaves for Saudi Arabia to work as President in exile; Houthis dissolve the Parliament and form a five-member Presidential Council to run the nation; Operation Storm of Resolve launched by Saudi Arabia and its coalition against Houthis from Yemen.
2016	UN-sponsored peace talks in Kuwait fail.

The visible shift in the regional order is marked by several trends and the prominent among them appears to be internal discontent against the long-lasting autocrats, deepening sectarian strife and changing ideological nature of regional politics, growing role of regional powers like Turkey and Israel apart from the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the crisis of Syria, Iraq and Yemen and, more importantly, gradual assertion of nations like Qatar and the UAE.⁶

Meanwhile, amidst this changing political scenario, one cannot overlook the new urge of Egypt to regain its past political clout. Egypt is trying to regain its lost political and strategic standing which has significantly waned in the last two decades. The uprising and the subsequent outcome, visible in a more entrenched role for the army, has spurred a new hope and unraveled a new desire to restore its strategic sway of the past. It has also become a fact that peace in the region would be a delusion until the Syrian crisis is resolved, and the resolution of the crisis itself has become a complicated exercise because of the involvement of multiple stakeholders and their interlocking interests.

Turkey and Israel too have emerged as significant and decisive actors in the regional transformation, which is likely to have a deep impact on the geo-strategy of the region. Immediately after the upheaval, Turkey lost no time in manifesting its ambitions and began maneuvering strategically at the cost of its much-lauded policy of ‘zero problem’ with the neighbors. It was not

6 Zaki Samy Elakawi, “The Geostrategic Consequence of the Arab Spring,” *Open Democracy*, November 22, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/zaki-samy-elakawi/geostrategic-consequences-of-arab-spring>, (accessed November 13, 2016).

only the first nation to call for the exit of President Assad, but it was also the first to host the group of rebel forces in the country. Turkey was looking for an opportunity to accommodate the MBH in the new unfolding trajectory of Syria, but Assad refused the demands of Turkey to share power with the MBH.⁷ Turkey almost stood along with the US and Israel with regard to Syria.

Similarly, Israel seems to be a major beneficiary of the turmoil and the unfolding situation is likely to offer it a strategic gain. Israel's air strike in February 2013 on the Scientific Research Centre at the outskirts of Damascus⁸ was a manifestation of an endeavor to weaken President Assad's government. The departure of Morsi's regime was another source of relief for Israel because Islamist's longer sustenance in power would have jeopardized the existing peace architecture favorable to Israel at the moment. Further, any conflict and rising terrorism in the region is likely to augment its security discourse which has always been a source of strength for Israel and has justified its security architecture and armament.

So far, the civil war in Syria has killed more than 400,000 people⁹ and the health and education sectors have been completely demolished. According to an UN estimate, half of the population

7 Meena Singh Roy (ed.), *Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implication*, Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis (Pentagon Press, 2014).

8 Ibid.

9 *The Syrian Conflict: Four Years On*, Staffen De Mistura, UN Special Envoy to Syria, The Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, March 5, 2015. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150305TheSyrianConflict.pdf, (accessed novemebr 22, 2016).

is in need of human aid.¹⁰ Syria has evolved from a state beset by economic problem to a full-blown war economy, creating chaotic environment and destroying the economic infrastructure. If the country grows at the normal rate of five per cent, it will take 37 years to attain the pre-war level of GDP.¹¹

The best framework to understand the current situation in the region is the framework of Cold War where two main rivals – Iran and Saudi Arabia – are not fighting directly, but are abetting respective regimes and non-state actors to achieve their strategic objectives. The geostrategic competition between the two has triggered a power struggle throughout the region and converted the region into a geopolitical great game.¹² The geostrategic map of the region is being determined and projected apparently in the guise of sectarianism, but the fundamental reality is marked by other templates as well. It would be a partial and inefficient approach if we color or see the rivalry between the two merely through a sectarian prism or as a Sunni-Shiite divide. The sectarian demographic nature of the region and its long term bearing on the political nature, no doubt, has a proportional role to play in the current crisis, but exclusive focus on sectarianism would distort the fact of the matter. This proposition becomes more relevant

10 Dr. Claire Spencer, “The Forgotten Syria,” The Chatham House, October 4, 2013. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/194629>, (accessed novemebr 22, 2016).

11 Florence Gaub and Alexandra Laban (ed.) Arab Futures: Three Scenarios for 2025, op. cit.

12 Zaki Samy Elakawi, “The Geostrategic Consequence of the Arab Spring,” *Open Democracy*, November 22, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/zaki-samy-elakawi/geostrategic-consequences-of-arab-spring>, (accessed November 13, 2016).

when one sees Kurds as an important actor, focusing more on their ethno-nationalist identity than Sunni sectarian creed.

The same holds true for the Muslim Brotherhood (MBH), a Sunni Islamist group, which has been a constant source of anxiety and apprehension for Saudi Arabia (a major Sunni bloc), which played a catalytic role in dislodging them from power in Egypt in 2013. Iran enjoys a good relationship with some of the Kurdish groups in Iraq and its support to Sunni-dominated Hamas is well known. Saudi Arabia extended full support to Iyad Allawi's party in Iraq, himself a Shiite by birth, but leader of the secular front in the elections of 2005 and 2010 in Iraq.¹³ Baathist secular regime of Syria could have been of no liking for an Islamist Iran, but the common enemy in the form of Iraq and Israel cemented close ties between them. The ruling Alawite elite in Syria is a heretic sect for many Shiites.

The current dimension of the conflict in the region is crystallized in the binary Iran-Saudi strategic outlook. While Iran wants a centralized security approach in the Gulf, but contrary to it, Saudi Arabia prefers external help from the US and other western allies like the UK to secure its regime in the region. The civil war in Syria has drawn all regional powers and has exhibited close linkage between domestic conflict, transnational affiliates and regional ambition.¹⁴

13 Michael R Gordon, "Meddling Neighbors Undercut Iraqi Stability," *New York Times*, December 05, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/06/world/middleeast/06wikileaks-iraq.html?pagewanted=all>, (accessed November 10, 2016).

14 F Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," Brookings Doha Centre, July 11, 2014. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf>, (accessed November 20, 2016).

What is happening in Syria is that local actors are looking for forces who share certain degree of ideological, sectarian, identical and political affinity with them and who, in turn, would help them to consolidate their linkage with the local actors. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are using these ideological and sectarian factors as a major ploy to enhance their influence. An arc of state weakness and state failure running from Lebanon through Syria to Iraq explains the salience of sectarianism in the new Arab world Cold War, which had its genealogy in the post-Saddam politics of Iraq. What has further aggravated and disrupted the strategic calculus in Syria and the region is the involvement of Russia. Russia was not only instrumental in rescuing the imminent collapse of Assad's regime, but also forged a new alliance with Iran to change the political and strategic course of the region. It was the access of Russia that eclipsed the role of Turkey and other GCC nations, which were bent upon altering the strategic status quo in the region by removing President Assad.

The removal of Saddam Hussein and Taliban's regime in the early years of 21st century from Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, explains the current rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria and the region as a whole. The post 9/11 US attacks have removed the two Sunni regimes –Iraq and Afghanistan – in the neighborhood of Iran. The removal of Saddam had enhanced Iranian influence in eastern Arab world (Iraq) and the Syrian crisis came as an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to balance the influence by removing Assad if not rolling back Iranian influence in the region completely. No doubt, by 2011, Saudi Arabia was surrounded by all instable forces in its neighbors: Bahrain in the east, Syria in the west and Yemen in the south and constant instability in Iraq in its north.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia already lost a close ally in Egypt after Mubarak succumbed to mounting people's pressure amidst the Arab uprising. Saudi Arabia also failed to subdue Hezbollah, an Iranian protégé in Lebanon, and the Iraqi strategic terrain has already been trampled by Iran. Even Saudi's support to US-created *Al-Sahwa* group to contain the rising dominance of ISIS in Iraq in 2006-2007 in order to confront the growing Iranian clout was not able to yield any desired strategic outcome for Saudi Arabia. The victory of the Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia was another setback for Saudi Arabia because the combination of Islam and democracy had not merely created anxieties and worries for decades-old Monarchy of Saudi Arabia, but it had also strengthened the Iranian ideological rhetoric and its championing of Islam in the region, which had all the potential to affect Saudi Arabia's stature in the region. The core worry for Saudi Arabia is that, so far, Iran seems to get the better of them, harnessing its strategic political clout despite bearing the brunt of multiple sanctions in the past.

In this background, the Saudi regime was all for Syrian rebel forces. Saudi Arabia immediately embraced the rebel forces and supported the Free Syrian Army with money and ammunitions, and other opposition groups were propped up by other wealthy nations of the Gulf like Qatar and UAE. Turkey and Qatar chose to support the Islamist forces, like the Syrian MBH, not in juxtaposition to Saudi Arabia-backed Salafist. The visible inability of Saudi Arabia and Turkey to form a powerful axis against Mr. Assad and Iran may be attributed to lack of unanimity and deep rooted divide among the Sunni world¹⁵ itself

15 When it comes to Shiite-Sunni divide in the Muslim world, the three

with regard to emerging political and strategic state of affairs in the region. The growing support of Qatar to MBH deepened the difference among the GCC which led to a coordinated call for withdrawing ambassadors from Qatar by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait in March 2014.¹⁶ According to an UN official quoted by Paul Danaher, “Even the proxy war is not coordinated there. The Turks are supporting their own clients, Qatari its own and Saudi its own and, in the long term, it might prove very destructive.”¹⁷

But Saudi Arabia was not ready to tolerate similar revolt in Bahrain, and at an early stage of the protest, it sent the GCC forces to crush the rebellion and supported NATO intervention in Libya. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia took a hasty step to broker smooth transfer of power, but soon it faltered and could not remain out of the growing strategic influence of Iran.

It is not merely Saudi-Iran rivalry that characterized the transition over the last six years. Another major regional power is Turkey whose, until very recently, democratic credential and economic advancement were acknowledged by the West. A decade before the Arab uprising, Turkey had placed itself in the region as a significant and momentous power with its famous

nations (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) are always clubbed together as a major Sunni bloc.

16 F. Geregory Gause, *Beyond Sectarian: The New Middle East Cold War*, Brooking, <https://www.brookings.edu/events/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/> (accessed November 06 2016)

17 Paul Danaher, *The New Middle East: The World after the Arab Spring* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), pp. 376, 377.

dictum of ‘zero problem with the neighbors’; it was a mediator in the Palestine-Israel crisis, Israel-Syria contention and Iran’s nuclear issue. Turkey’s strategic ambition was well visible after the departure of President Saddam when it embarked upon an effort to contain the growing Iranian influence in the region. Amidst the transition, Turkey’s treatment of the region as a zone of interest has transformed into a zone of influence.¹⁸ The erstwhile Prime Minister Erdogan was the first to visit Egypt, Tunisia and Libya after the revolution and expressed sympathy with the Islamist wave in Tunisia and Egypt. But, very soon, the Turkish model, evoked by many, turned out to be a mirage. It turned out to be a mirage for most of the countries having witnessed the uprising, which very soon slipped into anarchy and was engulfed in violence and conflict. Further, Turkey too failed to adhere to its romanticism of the past and lost no time in demonstrating its strategic ambitions colored with radical Islamic tones and contents, which annoyed many like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt as well.

The major epithet of Turkey’s foreign policy, ‘zero problems’, soon disappeared, and nowhere it was more pronounced than in the case of Syria. Turkey was the first nation in the region to call for the resignation of President Assad in Syria. It announced to cut its ties with Syria in September 2011 and became a gateway to send anti-Assad rebel forces in Syria, and the Syrian-Turkish border came to be known as the “Jihadist Highway.”¹⁹ Turkey nurtured close affinity with the anti-Assad Islamist forces (Syrian

18 Kristina Kausch, “Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East (ed.)”, FRIDE, 2015. http://fride.org/download/Geopolitics_and_Democracy_in_the_Middle_East.pdf, (accessed October 28, 2016).

19 Ibid.

MBH), while Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE supported different rebel blocs. Turkey not only became a partner in the civil war of Syria, but was deeply involved in the interplay of different external powers including non-state actors. Turkey was clubbed with the regional Sunni bloc despite several differences among themselves. It also lost its Islamist furor in the region after the MBH-inspired government was removed in Egypt in July 2013 and Saudi Arabia too became wary of Turkey's support to the Islamist in Syria.

Turkey was the most vehement critic of army's coup in Egypt, and its erstwhile Prime Minister Erdogan said that those who could not call a coup a coup are supporters of the coup.²⁰ The condemnation of the coup and siding with the Islamist antagonized the army regime, so its ties with another Sunni bloc in the region soured. At present, Turkey has no ambassador in Syria and Egypt and, recently, it appointed an ambassador to Israel. The new emerging alliance between Greece, Israel, Cyprus and Egypt are being seen by Turkey as undermining its economic interests in the Mediterranean as well. Its ties with Iran are not steady because of its Iraq policy and the same is true in the case of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

Turkey's policy towards the Jihadist further isolated it regionally and globally and the shooting down of Russian fighter dragged it almost on the verge of war. The Kurdish issue got a new lease of life amidst its overarching involvement, which offered an opportunity to the Kurdish forces to exploit the volatile region for its political objectives. The coordinated fight of Kurdish forces and the US-led alliance against the ISIS to regain Kubani in

20 Ibid.

Syria from its control and ambivalent role of Turkey accentuated the animosity between Turkey's Kurds and the government and, later, it led to substantial differences between the US and Turkey as well.

There are other nations like Israel and Egypt too, which have not only affected the transition in the region, but are deeply engaged in recasting its position in the emerging regional order. Egypt has always been an important factor in the region on account of its demography, its geostrategic position and control over Suez Canal – a linkage point between the Persian Gulf and Europe for supplies of oil and gas.

Over the last six years, the country witnessed several ups and down in its geostrategic sphere. Immediately after the departure of Mubarak and with the arrival of Islamist in the saddle of power, relations with its strongest strategic ally in the region, Israel, seemed to have reached its lowest. Egypt had found a new ally in Iran, a long-absent nation in the foreign policy lexicon of the country. Merely ten days after the exit of Mubarak, two Iranian ships were allowed for the first time since 1979 to enter into the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal. Egypt's Foreign Minister, Nabil Al-Arabi (March-June 2011) stated in an interview with the *Washington Post* that rapprochement with Iran was part of his policy and asserted that Iran is not an enemy. Egypt was also redefining its policy towards the cause of Palestine. Mr. Nabil Al-Arabi welcomed a Hamas delegation in March 2011, and not only opened the border with Rafah, but also called its closure a disgusting matter.²¹

21 Nael Shama, *Egyptian Foreign Policy from Mubarak to Morsi: Against the National Interest* (London: Routledge, 2014) p. 216.

But all these initiatives were reversed within one year after the Islamist government was removed and, once again, the ties with Israel and United States reversed to the pre-uprising era. Though with the US, it took some time to normalize ties as the US had held back the delivery of some of the weapons and the annual defense aid to the army. It was resumed only after the army regime showed its commitment to fight the ISIS on its border with Libya and in Sinai. Egypt found a common ally with the exception of Qatar in the GCC nations in its war against Islamic terrorism which, in turn, also rescued its collapsing economy.

Egypt launched a regional and global campaign against the Islamist with full support of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which, along with Kuwait, poured billions of dollars into its exchequer. President El-Sisi took no time in joining the orbit of Saudi Arabia which had felt deceived and had lost trust in the US policy after Mubarak was abandoned by it.²² By joining the GCC bloc, Egypt tried to erect an anti-Turkey Sunni bloc to combat the Islamists. Moreover, the ideological and strategic vulnerability of both Egypt and the GCC brought them closer where both seemed to pursue a policy aimed at rescuing their respective regimes. Both also maintained a similar stance in Libya and continued to support the same blocs of power there. Further, Egypt revived its strategic ties with Russia, an old strategic partner, to put pressure on the US, and both signed a series of agreements including one for nuclear power plant and arms deals. Egypt sided with Russia on the issue of Syria which, of course, antagonized the GCC. It has been discussed later in the paper.

22 F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East," Council Special Report, <http://www.cfr.org/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-new-middle-east/p26663>, (accessed November 20, 2016).

Amidst the volatile situation when each and every country was either struggling to confront its internal enemy or was fighting the battle of others, one nation that really found ample time and space to consolidate itself is the state of Israel. No doubt, Israel was jittered and completely taken aback at the turn of the event, particularly after Mr. Mubarak failed to survive people's pressure and stepped down. The primary concern of Israel was the future of Camp David agreement, a lynchpin of its strategy in the region because of its vulnerability and its besieged mentality.²³ Over the developments in Tunisia, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu underlined, "There is a great island of instability in the geographical expanse where we live. We hope that stability will be restored."²⁴ Even he did not prefer to call it a spring and rather remained stuck to referring to it as an upheaval. Israel's main worry was the response of its immediate neighbors like Jordan, Syria and Egypt and growing insecurity and uncertainty in the region and growth of non-state actors like ISIS and other Jihadists alongside its long border with Sinai and Syria.

But very soon, these worries and apprehensions vanished after the army, once again, took over the reign of power, which for Israel has been the biggest protector of its interest. The common concerns of Israel and GCC nations towards the Islamist might pave the way for deepening ties between the two blocs (GCC and

23 Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antabi, "Siege Mentality in Israel," Tel Aviv University, http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/psr/PSR1992/1_1992BarTa.pdf, (accessed November 19, 2016).

24 Remarks by Prime Minister Netanyahu, Cabinet Communiqué, http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2011/Pages/Cabinet_communique_16-Jan-2011.aspx, (accessed November 20, 2016).

Israel) in near future. The return of the army in Egypt has really strengthened the geostrategic position of Israel in the region like never before because both share common interest in the war against terror. Egypt's Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry's visit to Israel on July 10, 2016 was the first visit in a decade. The meeting between the two counterparts took place in Jerusalem, self-claimed capital town of Israel, which, as reported by a semi-official newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, recognizes the *Jewishness* of Jerusalem at the cost of Al-Quds. The more prolonged the war on the Syrian front, the more secured and powerful Israel is likely to emerge. Jordan and other neighbor states are entangled in their own conflict which is pushing them far away from the cause of Palestine, which has become almost a redundant issue.

The transition in the WANA region is not being determined by the regional actors alone, but the global players like Russia and the US which are equally defining and shaping the regional strategic trajectory. Geopolitical reshuffle has borne a new cooperation between Russia and Iran and a complex web of shifting relationship has emerged. The persisting rivalry in Syria has transcended the regional confines and now Russia and the US seem to be maneuvering strategically to achieve both short term and long term objectives. At present, Syria has become a hub of geopolitics for regional and global powers alike.

As far as external involvement in the region is concerned, the response of the US has been well guarded, but very pivotal. President Obama had begun his first term in office with the promise of extricating the ten years of over-involvement in the region, what he had termed then as 'overblown focus on global

war on terror'.²⁵ But the growing fragility and power vacuum and subsequent rise and consolidation of the ISIS brought the US back. In early days of the uprising, US's role was confined to the demands for exit of President Assad and smooth democratic transition in Egypt, but as the situation deteriorated, the US started to train the rebel forces in Syria and, very soon, a full-fledged operation (first air strikes and later ground troops) against the ISIS was launched, first in Iraq in 2014 and later in Syria in 2015. The US also sought the assistance of Turkey and European powers in its war against the ISIS. Iran is also reported to have a conditional endorsement of the US in its own war against the ISIS. The US's overemphasis on the war against terror and the ISIS would deter it from raising the democratic issues in the evolving Arab regional order. The US policy in the Arab world, particularly in Iraq and Syria, is more driven by its priority for dismantling the terror networks. But US's stance in Iraq and Syria seems to be very defensive unlike in Libya where it did not wait for long. Unlike in Iraq and Afghanistan in the past, the US preferred multilateral approach and deferred both the Syria and Libya first to the UN.

But what really came as a surprise in the current Arab crisis is the strategic assertion of Russia after an absence of almost three decades from the region. When Russia vetoed four UNSC resolutions along with China against Assad's regime, one had assumed that it was merely a reflection of Russia's disillusionment with the Western bloc, but Russia might be credited with changing the whole game of the Arab world. A major crisis was averted merely at the behest of Russia when the

25 Kristina Kausch, *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East* (ed.), op. cit.

US air strike seemed imminent against the regime of Assad in the aftermath of the use of chemical weapons against the civilians by the regime of Syria.

The intervention of Russia in Syria was not something of an overnight development, but it was in the offing gradually and steadily. Its strategy in the case of Syria was based on realism and experience of last two decades of world politics.²⁶ Russia sought an unprecedented level of cooperation both from China and Iran and both invested heavily in strategic, political and diplomatic terms. Russia not only promoted Syrian negotiation in order to lead the initiative, but increased its military supplies to Syria in the form of armed vehicles, drones, precision-guided bombs and other military equipment.²⁷

Russia slapped a powerful new piece on the strategic board of Syria when it deployed its forces in September, 2105 and since then it has emerged as a frontal player in the region. It not only waged war against the ISIS, but also rescued Assad's lurching regime. Today, after two year of its military involvement in Syria, a full-blown joint Russia-Syria war is going on against the rebel forces and the terror network including ISIS with no hope for an early end.

26 Anatol Lieven, "Putin Shows His Realism in Syria," *Al Jazeera*, October 16, 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/10/putin-shows-realism-syria-151013102705917.html>, (accessed November 27, 2016).

27 AbulJaleelAl-Marhoun, "TheStoryofRussia-SyriaRelations," *Middle East Monitor*, February, 7, 2014. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/europe/9631-the-story-of-syrian-russian-relations>, (accessed January 25, 2015).

What has further characterized the current political evolution is the growing role of external powers like China, Japan, UK, France and, to some extent, Italy as well. The role of these nations has not been identical and their focus has also been varying in nature, given the character of their past relationship and strategic stakes and economic and security interests.

China's growing role and strategic interest in the shifting regional strategic order was noticed when it vetoed two UNSC resolutions along with Russia on Syria. China was very instrumental in imposing vigorous modifications on the text of the peace plan prepared by UN envoy, Mr. Kofi Annan.²⁸ China extended all cooperation to Russian initiatives in Syria, and for China, it was primarily economic interest, which determined its stance on Syria. Damascus has been the traditional terminus node of the ancient Silk Road, which indicates that China now sees Syria as an important trading hub. The initiative of One Belt One Road makes it important for China to have a stable Syria toady.²⁹

One common factor among Russia, Iran and China (in Syria) is the inability of the West and its liberal ideas to penetrate in these countries. They are against regime changes. Interference from the West based on democracy, human rights and other liberal ideas poses questions to these three regimes which make them uncomfortable in their own home. The first ever visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt in

28 Jon B. Alterman and Carolyn Barnett, *Turkey, Russia and Iran in the Middle East*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, November, 2013. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-russia-iran-nexus>, (accessed January 25, 2017).

29 Yan, "Syria Allies: Why Russia, Iran and China," op.cit.

2016 cannot be seen in isolation from its desired new role in the region. China until recently had taken a back seat when it came to the region. The role of China in clinching Iran's nuclear deal was also very important which, perhaps, paved the way for new footprints for China.

Unlike in the past, Japan has apparently augmented its strategic and political visibility following the turmoil. In the past, its policy was characterized by proactive pacifism and, moreover, it has significantly been reflective of adherence to western consensus. But there has been a shift from passivity to activism, which has, no doubt, its precedence in its role in Iranian nuclear deal and its alliance with the post 9/11 US policies in the region. Japan has been an importer of hydrocarbon from the region and it imports as high as 90 per cent of its crude oil from the region,³⁰ and in 2014, it was the biggest oil importer in the world from the region,³¹ which has been an important determinant of its policy there.

Japan's primary interest, perhaps, lies in dissuading the spillover of the conflict to the Gulf because of its huge energy stakes. Japan, along with its close ally, the US, had already stated in the

30 Ahmad Rashid Malik, "Japanese Response to Crisis in Syria," *Pakistan Today*, February 13, 2013. <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2013/09/13/japans-response-to-crisis-in-syria/>, (accessed February 02, 2017).

31 Yoram Evron, "China-Japan Interactions in the Middle East: A Battle Ground of Japan's Remilitarization," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 30 (2017), Issue 02. <http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/YAFsG9Sle6xHPnk9TJwU/full>, (accessed January 02, 2017).

early days of the uprising that Assad had lost its legitimacy³² and it was perhaps one of the most vocal stances in the affairs of the region by Japan. In June 2012, it declared the Syrian Ambassador in Japan as *persona non grata*. It, along with the Western powers, supported the Kofi Annan plan and hosted the Friend of Syria group and invited the President of Syrian National Council to Japan in 2012.³³ But later, its focus shifted to humanitarian aid and its stance was more guided by the UN proposition on Syria. Japan gave a series of financial support to internally displaced people and coordinated with the UN and many NGOs to help them. It was amongst the few nations which mediated the deal to destroy the Syrian chemical weapons.³⁴ Japan exhibited some signs of autonomy when it did not support the US-led military actions in Syria.

The crisis in the region is likely to add confrontational dynamics between Japan and China, so their way of engaging is also diverse.³⁵ Japan is also an aspirant for greater role in the global affairs given its economic stature. In his visit to the region

32 Dr. Yokiko Miyagi, "Japan and the Middle East after the Arab Spring," *IDE ME Review*, Vol I (February, 2014). http://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Publish/Periodicals/Me_review/pdf/201402_02.pdf, (accessed January 30, 2017).

33 Dr. Yokiko Miyagi, Japan and the Middle East after the Arab Spring, *IDE ME Review* Vol. I (February, 2014) http://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Publish/Periodicals/Me_review/pdf/201402_02.pdf, (accessed January 30, 2017).

34 Ahmad Rashid Malik, "Japanese Response to Crisis in Syria," op. cit.

35 Yoram Evron, "China-Japan Interactions in the Middle East: A Battle Ground of Japan's Remilitarization, op. cit.

(Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey) in 2013,³⁶ Japan's Prime Minister, Mr. Abe had declared that the visit's goal was to forge economic cooperation across a wide range of fields and further a multi-faceted relationship that includes politics and security as well as culture.³⁷

Both UK and France were quite vocal and assertive in their stance vis-a-vis the regional crisis. In Syria, both called for the exit of President Assad and along with the US, they not only sided with the rebel forces, but also provided ammunition and sophisticated telecommunication system to the rebel forces to combat the regime.³⁸ After the US, Britain and France were the first to threaten to intervene militarily in Syria after alleged use of chemical weapons against the civilians in August 2013. The UK had put a suggested resolution in the UNSC as well in this regard. France and UK introduced and cosponsored a series of resolutions in the UNSC against Assad's government, including on Aleppo to end the Russia-led air strikes.³⁹ Both are part of the coalition in the war against the ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Likewise, in Libya, both countries sided openly with the anti-regime groups and both were at the forefront of the NATO mission in Libya. Not long after the civil war escalated in Libya, both

36 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page6e_000028.html (accessed July 5, 2016).

37 Yoram Evron, "China-Japan Interactions in the Middle East: A Battle Ground of Japan's Remilitarization," op. cit.

38 Meena Singh Roy (ed.) *Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implication*, op. cit.

39 "Syria's War: UN Security Council Vetoes on Aleppo," *Al Jazeera*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/syria-war-security-council-votes-aleppo-161008164635062.html>, (accessed February 03, 2017).

nations launched a campaign and became the main supporters of the UNSC resolution against Colonel Qadhafi. The erstwhile British Prime Minister, Mr. Cameron had instructed his Defense Secretary on February 28, 2011 to draw up a plan for a ‘no fly zone’ much before the UNSC resolution was passed for the same.⁴⁰ The French President and British Prime Minister were the first to visit Libya after the death of Qadhafi. The British government was more keen in the post Qadhafi Libya, and pledged to train the NTC army and provide medical facilities for critically ill Libyans in the UK.⁴¹ As far as Yemen is concerned, the British government has repeatedly called for a political solution and extended support to the efforts of the UN envoy. In a joint press conference with his US, Saudi Arabia and UAE counterparts, the British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson recently stated that the GCC national initiative, National Dialogue’s outcome and UNSC resolutions could be the only means for the resolution of the crisis in Yemen.⁴²

In comparison to France and UK, the role of Italy has been very nascent. Italy was opposed to the NATO-led operation against Libya and its former President Berlusconi had stated that NATO killed a leader who was his people’s beloved.⁴³ Given the nature

40 *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/oct/02/david-cameron-libyan-war-analysis>, (accessed December 26, 2016).

41 *Libya: Cameron and Sarkozy mobbed in Benghazi*, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14934352>, (accessed January 20, 2016).

42 Joint Statement on Yemen, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, October 16, 2016. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-yemen--3>, (accessed February 2017).

43 Meena Singh Roy (ed.) *Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implication*, op. cit.

of NATO's involvement in Libya, Italy refused to join the anti-ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) war in Iraq and Syria, but its special forces have reportedly joined the British forces to combat the ISIS in the towns of Libya. Italy has also permitted the US forces to use its air base in Sicily.⁴⁴

It is axiomatic that as the central authority recedes in the county, the role of non-state actors becomes more pronounced and this is what is happening in the Arab world today. Over the last five-six years, each and every country in the region has witnessed an unprecedented level of dominance of non-state actors. The rise of multiple terror and radical outfits has rendered the state not only powerless, but they have become the parallel political agencies in Iraq, Syria and Libya. ISIS, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Jabhat al-Nusrah and other radical fronts in Syria, Sadrist in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen and similar groups in Libya have made the state entity almost hostage to their dictates. The rise of ISIS in Iraq in June, 2014, almost shook the foundation of Maliki's regime, and the control of large swath of territories by the ISIS in Iraq and Syria is no more a secret.

These Jihadists, in some cases, are the affiliates or clients of the regional powers who have been nurturing them to achieve their objectives. Their rise and consolidation is also located in the domestic and regional political context of the past and present. In the current regional scenario, the role of non-state actors has transcended the role of the state itself. It is quite evident in the

44 Tom Klingon, "Italy Reportedly Sends its Special Force in Libya," *Defense News*, August 11, 2106. <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/mideast-africa/2016/08/11/libya-italy-special-forces-isis/88567660/>, (accessed February 03, 2017).

case of Qatar which proved more effective, through its non-state actors, in bringing about change in Libya than powerful nations like Israel and Turkey. Similarly, the role of Hezbollah cannot be undermined. Likewise, non-state actors in the form of ethnic, tribal and sectarian outfits have sabotaged a series of regional and global peace initiatives in Yemen and Libya.

The Present Complexities and Emerging Scenarios

What really characterized the last six years of tumult in the region are the strategic, diplomatic and political inconsistencies among stakeholders and proxies, formation of alliance and counter alliances, intra and inter-ideological and sectarian war and shifting web of interplay among different regional and global actors. The current scenario in the region is very complex and the underlined complexity seems to have all the potentials to prolong the conflict and deepen the sectarian divide accompanied by the involvement of more and more players.

The strategic incontinuity is nowhere more pronounced than the recent strategic shift of Egypt towards Russia when in the UNSC, Egypt voted twice along with Russia on the Syrian crisis which was averse to Saudi Arabia's stance.⁴⁵ The ambivalent attitude of Egypt on the current war in Yemen has also created a rift between the two and the Egyptian position on Syria is in more resonance with Russia and Iran than Saudi Arabia. All this

45 Maged Mndour, "Egypt Shift from Saudi Arabia to Russia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November, 03, 2016. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/65030>, (accessed November 20, 2016).

is happening when in 2014 election, President El-Sisi himself had pledged that the intervention to protect the Gulf nation would be part of Egyptian army doctrine.⁴⁶

What was more surprising was changing sides on the part of Egypt against the GCC, which had almost bailed it out of its economic mess. In retaliation, Saudi Arabia did not send its oil shipment for October which was a part of US\$22 billion deal between the two by which it had promised to export 700,000 million tons of refined oil every month for five years.⁴⁷ There are also reports that Egypt, in anticipation of souring ties with oil rich countries, sent its oil Minister to Iran, an arch rival of Saudi Arabia, to enter into a new oil deal which could be a watershed in the regional politics.

The situation has been more complex in Syria where one does not hear anymore anything about the exit plan of President Assad or any political transition. What one is hearing today in Syria is merely the fierce battle among the ISIS, anti-ISIS and anti-Assad rebel forces and joint Russia-Syrian airstrike, and US-led coalition airstrikes. The voices of early supporters of anti-Assad forces like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE and Qatar have almost eclipsed after Russia joined the war on the side of Syria in September 2015. Today, Syria has become the worst case scenario in terms of human rights violation where substantial part of the country is either besieged or facing a raging battle, and the death toll is constantly rising.

46 Ibid.

47 Elissa Miller, "Understanding Recent Egypt-Saudi Tension," Atlantic Council, October 25, 2016. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/understanding-recent-egypt-saudi-tensions#.WBC8PkJ54xs.facebook>, (accessed October 29, 2016).

The war in Yemen has almost become a war without end. The two-year long war of Saudi-led coalition has failed to achieve any of the strategic objectives. The rebel Houthi forces are still in control of large swath of territories and are the bulwark against Saudi Arabia. The regime of Hadi Mansour in exile has failed to make any headway towards stable political transition. A number of peace initiatives under the auspices of the UN in Kuwait, regional initiatives and other backdoor diplomacy by Oman have failed in the past to restore the political process because of the involvement of several domestic and regional stakeholders in the quagmire of Yemen.

Libya offers similar grim scenario despite the installation of UN-recognized government. But today, it is lurching under simmering pressure of several warring factions within the political blocs and other Islamist radical groups and, most prominently, the ISIS whose writ still runs in majority of the towns in the country.

No doubt, Turkey has been able to mend its ties with Russia after it remained soured for almost a year in the backdrop of shooting down the Russian plane. It has also been able to restore diplomatic ties with Israel after estrangement of almost five years following the incident of Marmara. Still, Turkey seems to have become a marginalized power in the region because of its growing difference with nations like Syria and Iraq on the Kurdish issue.

At present, it seems to have nothing to offer in the ongoing war of Mosul in Iraq against the ISIS because the government in Iraq has repeatedly asked it to withdraw its forces, while the US-led forces, Iraqi army, Kurdish Peshmerga and even the Iranian

Shiite militia are in coordination. In all this, the role of Turkey is almost obscure. The current war has further strengthened Iran's standing in the region, which is also helping it to make further strategic inroads.

The presence of Turkey's army in the Kurdish region in Iraq has come under heavy criticism from Iraqi Prime Minister who has termed it as the violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Iraq wants to take a frontal role in the current anti-ISIS war in Mosul. Turkey, with the second largest army in NATO, is stationed in the northern part of Iraq to train the Peshmerga and Sunni army.⁴⁸ What has further weakened Turkey's standing in the region is the attempted coup against President Erdogan in July 2016, which has, for the time being, deterred Turkey from showing regional posturing. The subsequent clampdown against the alleged plotters and its affiliates has once again brought the country under the global scanner and Turkey is likely to have a troublesome future.

Possible Future Scenarios in the Arab World

In the light of above narrative of last six years of upheaval that the region has undergone, the following and last section of the paper would highlight some of the future potential scenarios the Arab world might face. These scenarios are extrapolation of current events, which are directly impacting the geopolitics of the fast altering region in terms of power balance, strategic alliance and

48 "Turkey Says Its Troop to Stay in Iraq until Islamic State is Cleared from Mosul, Reuters, October 13, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-turkey-idUSKCN12C0KF?il=0>, (accessed November 22, 2016).

counter alliance and, moreover, an unvarying contestation by major countries to locate themselves at the top of the regional order. First, the section will deal with a few prominent countries separately and that would be followed by a brief sketch of the region as a whole.

Iran: The regional division and competition for influence have been longstanding features of the Arab politics. But what distinguished the post-Arab uprising phase is the emergence of a new set of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia after a lull witnessed after the departure of Saddam in Iraq.⁴⁹ Iran is the single country which would be dominating the future trajectory in the region in near future. It has emerged as the most dominant player in the strategic gambit following the Arab turmoil. It is likely to have full grip over Syria and would enjoy all strategic leverage over Iraq in near future. Iran has emerged very powerful after almost sidelining Saudi Arabia and Turkey, two early powers to muddle in the Syrian affairs and, today, Iran enjoys a comfortable place in the strategic calculus of Russia, which is likely to play a dominant role in the region.

Iran has all the potential to fill the power vacuum in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. Iran might use MBH, Hezbollah, Hamas and Al-Quds Brigade and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to dominate the politics in Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. On bilateral level with Egypt, not much is likely to happen, and it would depend more on how Saudi-Egypt ties are

49 Naysan Rafati, "Iran and the Arab Spring," http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR011/FINAL_LSE_IDEAS_IranAndArabSpring_Rafati.pdf on November 20, (accessed 2016).

working. Bahrain might be another flash point in near future because it is still an open wound for Iran, which might reassert and turn Bahrain into the most vulnerable part of the GCC. Not only the GCC, but nations like Jordan and Egypt would also be concerned with the growing influence of Iran. The King of Jordan had already called the post Saddam era in the region as a new formation of the Shiite crescent.⁵⁰

The growing rivalry and subsequent entrenchment of sectarian and ideological politics is likely to pose a direct threat to political and economic stability and security of the entire Gulf region. The fault lines and deep divide within the region would naturally offer more and more strategic depth to external regional and global actors. This division will further embolden the non-state actors who might seek political, military and strategic support from across the region not only to determine the route of the politics in the region, but also impose agendas averse to the promotion of stability in the region.

The existing political and strategic scenario is not favorable for the region and there is relatively less hope for an early resolution of the crisis. This may be attributed to the complexity of the crisis, involvement of numerous players and different stakes, and unfolding of new fault lines across the region. The current chaos and instability may enhance the possibility of a new race for armament and GCC may raise its budget on defense and engage in a record level of sectarian war and get trapped into

50 Yaniv Voller, "Turmoil and the Uncertainty: Israel and the New Middle East, http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR011/FINAL_LSE_IDEAS_IsraelAndTheNewMiddleEast_Voller.pdf, (accessed November 13, 2017).

the war of rhetoric. Saudi Arabia is already the third largest spender on defense after the US and China, as it already spends twenty-five percent of its total budget on defense only.⁵¹ There is the possibility that the region might witness different levels of declared, undeclared, direct and indirect confrontations between Iran and the GCC nations and, perhaps, it has become more pronounced due to the waning role of Egypt, Iraq and Jordan over the decades. The more strategic depth Iran achieves in the region, the more outfits like Hezbollah and Iranian militias will get emboldened. Iran's protégé, Hezbollah has already emboldened and strengthened due to its crucial role in the civil war of Syria. Iran has maneuvered in the region by different means: creating non-state actors, playing the sectarian card and flaming anti-US and Israel feelings.⁵²

Iran's arch rival in the region, Saudi Arabia, which has introduced multi-layered economic and political reforms in the recent past (details discussed in the section on Saudi Arabia) which, no doubt, would impact its current strategic ploy in the near future. But, at present, it seems to have been one of the major losers in the current transforming regional order. Saudi Arabia is likely to lose its position further in the region in the wake of its apparent marginalization in Iraq, Syria and Yemen as well, where its war against Iran-backed Houthis has not yielded any favorable outcome. The removal of Saddam, de-bathification and subsequent power vacuum came as an invitation on silver platter for Iran. In Syria, the Saudi regime seems to have lost the

51 David Hearts, "Saudi Arabia Reaps what It has Sowed," November 02, 2016, *Middle East Eye*, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/saudi-foreign-policy-1215866329>, (accessed February 05, 2017).

52 http://fride.org/download/PB202_Iran_in_the_Middle_East.pdf, (accessed February 05, 2016).

ground because one does not hear anymore about the demand for the departure of President Assad, which was earlier one of the main demands of Saudi Arabia and its allies in the region. The sustenance of Assad in power is the biggest strategic and ideological victory for Iran and it has given Iran an unprecedented level of leverage over Saudi Arabia in the region. The fall of Assad could have been the biggest strategic setback for Iran because it is the bulwark against Iran's strategic contender in its transit to Hamas and Hezbollah – an ideological necessity for Iran.

Iran has emerged as a revisionist power and enjoys considerable capability to change the geopolitical control of the region, and wants a permanent say in the areas from Iran to the Mediterranean. Iran would matter in the affairs of the region because of its demography, newly acquired economic strength in the wake of nuclear deal with the West and enhanced military capability due to its several arms deals with Russia and Western powers.

Iran would seek to stamp its imprimatur on the events in the region and the day-to-day occurrence has ushered in a lot of opportunities for Iran in terms of its strategic calculus. The strategy of Saudi Arabia seems to be falling apart in Yemen too (its operation has not been able to recapture Sana or stop its missile attacks in the Saudi territories) where Iran has spoiled Saudi's design of preserving its last pillar, and the Houthis, in no way, seem to be losing the ground.

The growing intervention of Iran in the region has not gone unnoticed among the Western powers, particularly the US and UK and both have already warned against growing intervention of Iran. The new British Prime Minister, Theresa May, in her recent visit to Saudi Arabia and in an address to the GCC summit,

expressed deep concerns over growing intervention of Iran and called Iran a regional threat. She also stated that “Gulf security is our security and ‘your (Gulf) prosperity is our (UK) prosperity.’”⁵³ The GCC is seeking new commitment from other allies to deter the external threat originating from the new political ambition and strategy of Iran, which it is pursuing amidst the turmoil in the region. Meanwhile, the US has constantly warned Iran against new level of Iranian maneuvering in the region and, recently, its new Defense Secretary, Mr. James Mattis called Iran the world’s biggest sponsor of terror. According to Saudi official news agency, Mohammad-Bin-Suleiman, Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister of Saudi Arabia, held a telephonic conversation with his new US counterpart, Mr. James Mattis on February 1, 2017 and both condemned the Iranian and its protégé’s intervention in the GCC region.⁵⁴

Iran’s isolation in the global arena has waned relatively following the nuclear deal and Arab turmoil had already come as an opportunity to redefine its role and regain what it had lost in the span of last three decades. No doubt, Iran is intrigued with many of the internal political contradictions, but it is not likely to be a hurdle in its way of acquiring new strategic and political depth and shape the region in its own strategic aspiration. The earlier galvanization of global community is no more an issue for Iran, which was the case before the nuclear deal. The nuclear

53 Prime Minister’s Speech to the Gulf Co-operation Council, December 7, 2016, Gulf Co-operation Council, Manama. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-to-the-gulf-co-operation-council-2016>, (accessed December 10, 2016).

54 <http://www.akhbaralaalam.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=120061>, (accessed February 05, 2016).

deal has provided Iran with a new freedom of outlook. Iran will fill the power vacuum in the region and that would be informed by its sectarian and ideological appeal. Now, there seems to be no check against limiting the influence of Iran and limiting the trade in the region that would be a special leeway for Iran. What is happening today in the region is compatible to its interest and ideological values and its interest in the region.

The region may witness a new sort of rivalry and strategic grouping between Iran and Russia on one side and GCC and western powers, particularly the UK and US on another side in near future. The visit of Prime Minister Theresa May of UK has already indicated the future prospect of deeper alliance between the GCC which might anchor against the rise of Iran. Iran along with Russia is likely to limit Turkey's option, which has its own ambition in the region. Iran would be looking for more and more alliances beyond the region as evident from its ties with Russia and it is already forging ties with Latin American nations. The Iran-Russia ties are challenging the autonomy of many nations in Central Asia like Azerbaijan where both entered into an agreement. Russia and Iran are making economic encroachment in southern Caucasus region. Taking a broader view of the region suggests that Iran's bilateral, regional and global relationship will determine the level of Iranian assertion.

Israel: Israel has really emerged as the strongest strategic power after the Arab uprising, and it is likely to remain so. One primary reason for being so is a complete shift in the regional priority in the wake of Arab upheaval and no focus on Israel is the best bet for Israel. Over the last five years, when the region was engulfed in turmoil and global peace efforts remained focused on Syria,

Yemen, Iraq, and Libya, the Israel government continued with its much-criticized policy of settlement expansion. It would not be inaccurate to assert that no-negotiation is the best negotiation for Israel and the absence of any imitative on Palestine-Israel crisis is likely to remain the case in near future. The extensive disturbance in the region will distract the attention from Israel.

The border of Israel, which is the lifeline of existence for Israel, along with Syria and Egypt is the safest in today's time on account of return of the army in Egypt and Hezbollah (another trouble maker for Israel) and other militias' involvement in Syria. The status quo is likely to be the best option for Israel in near future. There is no likelihood that Israel would be threatened with Syrian supply of arms to Hamas like in the past because both current and new regime would focus on internal reconstruction. Israel will prefer the survival of a known evil than an unknown evil in Syria. No military adventure is possible by Syria today against Israel and there could be no talk on Golan Heights because the regime has lost its legitimacy. In the fast changing strategic and diplomatic scenario of the region, one should not be surprised if more and more nations in Arab world would establish diplomatic ties with Israel as the Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu himself in the last UNGA annual meet asserted that the views of the Arab leadership vis-à-vis the state of Israel are changing very fast.⁵⁵

Most of the governments in the region seem to have been fatigued with the protraction of the crisis and, very soon, Qatar and Oman may recognize the state of Israel, though they would

55 Netanyahu Speech in UN General Assembly, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Benjamin-Netanyahu/READ-Full-text-of-Netanyahus-speech-to-UN-General-Assembly-468500>, (accessed November 02, 2016).

begin with trade and military. Saudi Arabia is no more in a position to support Palestine because of its financial constraints. The Arab leaders have become paranoid after Iran nuclear deal and there were reports of backdoor diplomacy between GCC leaders and Israel to prevent the deal. Moreover, the ongoing conflict has forced large scale internal and external migration in the Arab region, which is likely to provide additional leverage to Israel with regard to its national security narrative, a hallmark of its strategy in the region. The removal of Islamist in Egypt has added to the democratic credential of Israel, which has always claimed that it is the only democracy in the island of monarchy and autocracy. The complete disaster of democratic aspirations of the Arab people, which could have been a boon for Palestinians, has come for Israel as a sigh of relief in the long term. Iran's threat to the existence of Israel would be no longer an issue after the nuclear deal. Moreover, Iran's support to Hamas would be conditional because of growing sectarian nature of politics, an issue which is likely to harm the cause of Palestine.

Palestine as an issue would lose prominence in the actual geopolitics of the region because of the emergence of more pressing issues, which make the regional and global leadership to focus on internal tremors. The Palestinian authority has become almost redundant and there is no hope for any early revival. The division within the leadership in Palestine will persist for time to come because there are other priorities in the region like Syria and Yemen, which would naturally eclipse the cause of the Palestine. The more the Palestinian issue disappears from the political psyche of the Arab masses, the more it is beneficial for Israel, and this is what is being witnessed today. The persisting

crisis and violence in the Arab world would justify all sorts of unilateralism in the region on the part of Israel, which will hamper the peace process and render the issue of state of Palestine hollow. The arrival of President Trump in the White House has apparently emboldened the Israeli government which, in Mr. Trump, has found a great friend and sympathizer unlike Obama whose last days were not so favorable for the government of Netanyahu. After the change of guard in the White House, the resettlement policy of Israel in the West Bank may get further impetus and Mr. Trump has already indicated that he would work with more commitment to shift the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which is likely to ruin the hitherto-failed peace process further.

Egypt: Once Egypt was said to be the fulcrum of regional politics because of deep security ties with Israel, presence of the Suez Canal – a lifeline of global trade and, moreover, for being the biggest strategic ally of the US in the region. But in recent years, the strategic importance and political strength of Egypt has waned drastically due to fast changing nature of regional and global politics and, moreover, the changing dynamics of country's internal politics where its economy has become stagnant and its past image of a civilizational and cultural force has eroded. Egypt is no more counted as a strategic ally or at least a partner or collaborator in the region and unlike Iran or Saudi Arabia, it has no networks of regional support for itself. In near future, the military regime in collaboration with political and economic elites is likely to suppress the voices of democracy in the name of security and major economic progress is less likely because of its reliance on foreign donations. Its ties with Israel will further

strengthen and that will alienate people at large and ties with Turkey seem to be straining more because of Turkey's constant Islamic rhetoric in foreign policy and Egypt's continued war against the Islamists.

One basic feature that would define the Egyptian scenario in future is its harping on domestic issues (mainly economic and security) to advance the foreign policy cause. In the past, Egypt enjoyed a different status because of its sympathetic association with the cause of Palestine and as a frontal player on the Palestine arena. But after the coup against the MBH-led government, it seems to have abandoned the cause of Palestine and is seeking a deeper alliance with Israel. Egypt has taken a back seat in the regional affairs and its role as a dynamic foreign policy player seems to have vanished for years to come.

At the moment, the Gulf region seems to have become the hub of regional politics. The regional politics has become a Gulf moment. Egypt will continue to assert on other issues than Palestine and its prioritization of war against terrorism over Palestine would be the mainstay of its regional policy. In case of any ensuing violence between Hamas and Israel, it is likely to stand by Israel because of its commitment to security in Sinai and its own fight against terrorism. There is another possibility that the regime in the region can exploit the issue of Palestine as a mark of rhetoric because of their losing popularity at home or they can full-fledged join Israeli to counter the growing ambitions of Iran.

Its dependence on the GCC for financial aid is likely to remain, but it also depends upon how long the regime in Egypt remained committed to the strategic requirement of the GCC. But Egypt

cannot afford to neglect the issue of financial assistance because already the Egyptian economy is in a mess and that might lead to another wave of mass anger. Egypt needs to fulfill the GCC's diplomatic and strategic requirement to receive financial aid. There is already fissure between the two sides. Egypt's recent vote in UNSC on Syria along with Russia, not in concurrence with the interest of Saudi Arabia, has estranged each other.

Egypt is likely to diversify its ties with other nations in near future because it cannot go along with GCC for a long time due to the flux in regional politics and volatile nature of strategic alliance. The regime is fighting the war against Islamic terrorism and seeking a global alliance in this regard, and the GCC has its own limitation to be a part of full-fledged war against the Jihadists. Its ties with Russia will further strengthen in order to pursue its own independent security policy away from Saudi Arabia's conditional strategic demands (Egypt did not join the full-fledged war in Yemen and was not enthusiastic towards Islamic Military Alliance launched by Saudi Arabia). The growing Egypt-Russia ties on defense would also be a source of tension with Saudi Arabia. President El-Sisi might find it difficult to maintain competing demands of Russia and Saudi Arabia, and, most probably, he would choose Russia because of its military strength.

The first joint-military exercise between the two on the soil of Egypt is reflective of deepening ties. Both sides announced free trade zone between Egypt and Russia led Eurasian economic union in 2015, Russia was allowed to make industrial zone near Suez Canal and, in addition, Russia promised to build a nuclear plant in Egypt and both sides signed a US\$3.5 billion arms

deal.⁵⁶ Perhaps, Egypt might use Moscow as a counterbalance against the US for ensuring continued military and economic assistance.

Recently, a high-level visit of Syrian officials to Cairo caused strain in ties with Saudi Arabia. Cairo has been invited by the government of Syria to coordinate between the UN and Damascus to reach the aid to Aleppo. Egypt's financial constraint and its dependence on GCC and IMF would not allow Egypt to make strategic inroad in the region.⁵⁷

Egypt will remain divided with an enmeshed role for the army and the economy would continue to be in bad shape. Army would be seen as counter revolutionaries which, with the passage of time, would be more powerful. The security threat in Egypt could undermine the democratic prospect and might create a new alliance in the region. Egypt will preferably love to see a status quoist region. Several other issues like the demand for Arab Defense Force would not see the light of the day. The tight rope will not always be easy for Egypt and once it would be bound to choose one amongst many in the region and, perhaps, it would prefer sooner or later the one which does not impact it directly. The US and EU will again reprioritize security over democracy and that will be an additional source of counterbalance against

56 http://fride.org/download/Geopolitics_and_Democracy_in_the_Middle_East.pdf, op. cit.

57 David Held and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Arab Spring and the Changing Balance of Global Powers," *Open Democracy*, February 26, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/david-held-kristian-coates-ulrichsen/arab-spring-and-changing-balance-of-global-power>, (accessed 16 November, 2016).

the aspirants of democracy in the country. Egypt's economic and security-oriented foreign policy cannot last longer and the biggest question remains – how long can the GCC nations support Egypt and rescue it from economic bankruptcy.

Turkey: The way Turkey emerged as a hope for democratic aspirant nations passing through political turmoil, one never imagined that its role in the region would vanish so soon. In the recent past, particularly, after the arrival of President Erdogan, the Turkish Islamic and democratic integration had become a model for the West, and immediately after the Arab Spring, it was assumed that nations aspiring for democracy would follow that model. But given the present scenario, Turkey seems to be the biggest loser of the Arab uprising. The image of Turkey as a model vanished long ago and its own regional strategic survival is at stake. There is no taker of its much-hyped rhetoric of ‘zero problem with the neighbors’. The Syrian crisis terminated the myth of Turkey as a benevolent mediator and signaled the failure of its zero problems with the neighbors.⁵⁸

In near future, Turkey's role in the regional affairs would not be independent of other major stakeholders because of its dubious approach to the crisis in the region. The Syrian affairs would almost be run by Russia-Iran alliance. Turkey is likely to forge close ties with Saudi Arabia to counter the rising clout of Iran in the region and its own differences with it in the region and this new equation is likely to remain unchanged for some time

58 Erzsebet N. Rozsa, “Geo Strategic Consequence of the Arab Spring,” 19 Papers IEMed., Joint Series with EuroMesco, June, 2013. // www.files.ethz.ch/isn/182508/Paper_EuroMeSCo19.pdf, (accessed November 16, 2016).

in near future. The formation of strategic cooperation council between the two is indicative of the fact that both would seek close cooperation which may be directly attributed to the rising role of Iranian militias, growing sectarian politics, apparent retreat of the US from the region and failure of Arab regional system and weakening of central authority which has become a source of worry for both the nations.

Turkey's war against the ISIS is very much under the shadow of suspicion because of interlocking situations in Syria and Iraq. Its relation with no country in the region is smooth and it has no ambassador in Syria and Egypt today and, only recently, it sent an ambassador to Israel. Turkey could have engaged in the transition, but, of late, it seemed to be acting in an indecisive manner while dealing with the turmoil in the region. The rise of non-state actors in the region, its selective abetment to a few of them, its own decades-old problems with the Kurds and growing autonomy of Syrian Kurds following the turmoil might create multi-layered problems for Turkey. It is likely to be vulnerable to the emerging fault lines, and the strengthening of Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria in recent years has already emboldened the Kurds on Turkey, which might be another biggest security challenge for Turkey in the coming months and years.

The relation with Iraq is almost soured after it stationed its army to train the Kurdish Pehemerga despite repeated cautions of the Iraqi regime, and even in the current war against the ISIS in Mosul, Turkey is the most negligible partner in the operation. Turkey had emerged as a power standing between the Arabs and Iran, but its overarching policy in Syria seems to have deprived it of that role. In Syria, its role has changed from an ally to a

mediator to an adversary. No doubt, Turkey has amended its soured ties with Russia substantially, but after many strategic sacrifices, which is likely to prevent it to play any major strategic gamble. In its own backyard, Turkey seems to have been left out after Iran-Russia-Azerbaijan entered into an agreement in Baku for the marketing of its oil and gas.⁵⁹ Turkey has earned a bad name for supporting terrorism in Syria and that would continue to haunt its image in the region. In a nutshell, Turkey will be a power with the least influence, and more regional players like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel seem to have lost trust in Turkey. What is to be seen is the unfolding internal political dynamics after the Parliament passed the resolution for referendum, thereby according sweeping power to the President which, no doubt, would have deep impact on its regional politics.

Saudi Arabia: Before proceeding with an account of future prospects of Saudi's role and its strategic path amidst regional transformation, the section would briefly highlight some of the economic reforms, with its likely impact on the politics the nation is witnessing and which, no doubt, would have deep bearing on its domestic and regional outlook and strategic vision.

The monarchical regime has introduced a series of economic reforms in the recent past, particularly, after Mohammad-Bin-Suleiman was named the Deputy Crown Prince and became the Defense Minister. In 2015, he enunciated a plan of restructuring the national economy as the Chairman of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs and came up with two-fold plans (Vision 2030) and (National Transformation Plan)

59 News Updates, BBC Monitoring, October 14, 2016. <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/#/product/c1d8emge>, (accessed November 15, 2016).

in April and June 2016, respectively.⁶⁰ He also declared that Saudi Arabia has no ideology except national development and modernization.⁶¹ This, in itself, is a sea change and major departure from its past for a nation which never shied away from calling itself an ideological state, better known as the Wahabist state.

In the wake of the new economic vision, the regime has a comprehensive plan to diversify country's economy and lessen its dependence on oil as a traditional source of revenue. It announced to impose a series of new taxes and reduce subsidies on energy, and it also reduced government officials' salary by 16 per cent. There is already a plan to privatize health care, electricity and water sector, moving away from its welfare approach of the past. Another aim of this new economic venture is to offer more jobs to its own citizens because 70 per cent of Saudi demography is occupied by youth of less than thirty years of age. The plans also include imposing new taxes including taxes on annual and seasonal pilgrims. The regime has moved away from its old dictum, "We pay you and you shut up."⁶² But now, this would not be the case leading to a new set of social contract

60 Bernard Haykel, "Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself," *Mint*, December 30, 2016. <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/lZiG2ppGPQAFhGbzfM1nWO/Bernard-Haykel--Can-Saudi-Arabia-reform-itself.html>, (accessed February 01, 2017).

61 Dennis Ross, "In Saudi Arabia A Revolution Disguised as Reform," *Washington Post*, September 08, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/in-saudi-arabia-a-revolution-disguised-as-reform/2016/09/08/979f03f6-7526-11e6-b786-19d0cb1ed06c_story.html, (accessed February 05, 2017).

62 David Held and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Arab Spring and the Changing Balance of Global Powers," *op. cit.*

between the regime and the rulers with the claim that if the state cannot pay us, why should we shut up. The regime has already made various political concessions by accommodating women in the consultative body (Shura Council), granting electoral suffrage to them, stripping the rights of religious volunteers to harass the people in public, delegating more powers to Shura and decentralizing the powers of the monarchy on several issues including the economic one.

The imposition of taxes on pilgrims is likely to affect very much the regime's standing in the region and across the world and might have much deeper impact on its unchallenged theocratic and autocratic nature of governance. The provision of offering employment to its own citizens would naturally curtail the labor forces from nations like Egypt, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, affecting its strategic relevance and political standing among the Muslim nations. The doing away of its rentier mode of economy would obviously bring to an end political appeasement leading to new social and political relationship between the rulers and masses. The regime will have to reinvent the social contract with the people and, in near future, the people may preferably demand more say in the governance of the country.⁶³ This might lead to a new political culture of accountability and transparency within the system because Vision2030 has already fixed new administrative responsibility. New fiscal coercion is not likely to allow the continuation of political repression and fiscal coercion itself might lead to a new kind of rage in the kingdom, posing a set of new challenges to the regime itself.⁶⁴ New economic

63 Bernard Haykel, "Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself," *op. cit.*

64 http://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/economic-reform-saudi-arabia-middle-east-security-20301/, (accessed November 20, 2016).

transformation and new amalgamation of private-public sectors would require a new audit which is likely to affect the autonomy of religious authority and render exposed the entrenchment of religious elites in the national economy, who continue to bolster the legitimacy of the regime today.

New beginning in the political domain could pave the way for more comprehensive reforms where people would not only determine the domestic policy, but would also act as catalysts in shaping and providing orientation to country's foreign policy in the near future. The reformed regime of Saudi Arabia might affect the survival of other regimes as well because Saudi Arabia has remained a staunch supporter of other GCC regimes. It is worth mentioning here how instantly Saudi Arabia had come to the rescue of Bahrain when it was challenged by the revolutionaries in the beginning of the turmoil.⁶⁵ Any political opening in Saudi Arabia might trigger sweeping wave of demands for more political freedom and social liberty, and it is already being witnessed in the form of a persistent demand for political reforms in Bahrain and Oman. The succession crisis in Oman might pave the way for a new democratic urge in the kingdom. The political freedom and social liberty introduced in the country is likely to change its global image of a conservative and orthodox political model.

The above mentioned nature of domestic political and economic reforms in the country is likely to have both short term and long term impact not only in Saudi Arabia, but across the region. At present, Saudi Arabia's policy in the region is likely to be Iran-centric as far as the regional rivalry is concerned. This became

65 Ibid.

clearer when the US President chose to land in Saudi Arabia on his first foreign tour after becoming President. He paid two-day visit to Saudi Arabia in May and participated in three high-level Summits: Saudi Arabia-US Summit; GCC-US Summit and Islamic Arab Leaders-US Summit. Apart from the economic and defense issues, the expansionist design of Iran in the region was discussed in the bilateral and the US-GCC Summits. The issue of Iran in the Gulf region is a major and prolonged source of unrest and anxiety for the GCC leaders in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. The success of Donald's current visit to Saudi Arabia lies in conveying a stern message to Iran that the US would be an indissoluble part of the Gulf security architecture. Accompanying the US Secretary of State, Mr. Tillerson in a joint conference with his Saudi counterpart, he stated that the focal point of Donald's visit to the Gulf nation is to curb the threat of neighboring Iran. Nothing could have been more appreciative for the Gulf regimes than the commitment of the US towards the Gulf regimes. What could have pleased the ruler more than the statement of the head of the strongest nation on the planet, Mr. Trump, exhorting that Iran, a traditional ideological and political adversary of Saudi Arabia, is responsible for so much of instability in the region and it is spearheading terrorism.

The whole policy of Saudi Arabia in the region would be of counterbalancing or rolling back the influence of Iran in the region, and it has already started upgrading its alliance with nations, like the UK as explained earlier. The next move of Saudi Arabia would be to rescue Bahrain because it cannot afford to lose it after it lost Iraq and Egypt and seems to be in the process of losing Yemen too. Bahrain is most likely to be the next hub of

proxies in the region after its seemingly defeat in Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia may offer full membership to Jordan and Morocco in order to deepen its strategic influence and enlarge its alliance in order to seek greater unity within the GCC because of new level of Iranian and Russian strategic penetration. In the coming months and years, there is a likelihood of deepening rift among the GCC and its members, for example, Qatar and Oman may drift to the camp of Iran because both have enjoyed a different relationship with Iran, which is not only different from the rest of the GCC, but also contrary to Saudi-led collective approach.

Saudi Arabia might find a new enemy in Hezbollah and its ties with Turkey could remain tense and unstable because of Turkey's constant Islamic rhetoric and support to the Islamists in the region. Saudi Arabia is not likely to remain a prominent power in the region because its ally, Egypt is no more prominent and its bad economic situation, unlike in the past, would not allow it to boost its role in the region or win over the adversaries. The basis of Saudi ability to take a leading role in the region and its soft power image, constructed by the presence of two holy mosques is no more likely to be as important as in the past. Iran's military and diplomatic assertions are well supplemented by an ideological and theological contention which might attract many toward Iran. There are reports of an enunciation of *Hussiani pilgrims*⁶⁶ which is a new phenomenon and that

66 In this year's mourning congregation in Iran, which is an occasion to mourn the death of Hussein, a few liberal newspapers of Iran termed this congregation as *Hajj Hussiani*, a novel idea in the Shiite theology because Hajj historically is performed by visiting the holy town of Mecca only.

has been initiated as a defiance against Saudi Arabia's denial to allow Iranians to perform *Hajj* this year.

The image of Saudi Arabia as moderate in the US lexicon of foreign policy, opposed to Iraq and Syria as radicals is no more relevant. The global war against terrorism and the ISIS and varying and incoherent stances of the Saudi regime has further diminished and exposed the pretence and hypocrisy of the regime. The embrace of Iran by the Western power in the wake of the nuclear deal may be characterized as a zero sum game for Saudi Arabia, which means that any pro-Iranian stance on the part of any bloc would come as a strategic loss for Saudi Arabia. The anti-Iran ante by Saudi Arabia and its allies is also likely to lose its fervor and appeal which would be a great strategic loss for Saudi Arabia in the coming years. In conclusion, Saudi Arabia would be an important factor in the region, but Iran will enjoy an edge over it.

Overall Arab Scenario

Overall, the region is likely to remain unstable, a hub of non-state actors and power vacuum, fragility, and deep sectarian and ethnic divide would define the core of the political transition. States like Libya, Yemen and Syria might take ample time to stabilize or remain in tatters for a long period of time as, today, most part of their territories have been ceded to non-state actors. The Arab region will have a set of accumulated crisis in the form of unemployment, increasing demography, urbanization, and threat of absence of economic reform apart from the present conflict caused by the uprising.

The security issue will be the defining common feature of all states' policy and, in the process, democracy, the main component of the Arab aspiration, would be the ultimate victim. Persistent conflict will hamper the long-desired economic integration of the region and will thwart the implementation of previous projects, and the absorption of educated persons in the job market would be a daunting challenge for the regimes. Jordan and Tunisia have managed the unemployment crisis because of the level of skill education, but Saudi Arabia and others have failed to do so and rely heavily on surplus scheme. The past scheme for economic integration has been implemented, like the 1997 Great Arab Free Trade Area Agreement (GAFTA), but it failed to reach to the point of common market which was to be implemented in 2020, and now it seems a mirage.

The security issue in the region will also scuttle the economic reforms conceived in the recent past and would deter the much-needed foreign direct investment. For instance, Egypt had managed to attract a number of IT brands, such as Microsoft, Oracle, Vodafone and IBM in early days of Morsi but, recently, it has lost several of the investors.⁶⁷ IKEA, which opened its first shop in Egypt in 2013, left in 2015 after a terror attack and Coca Cola also moved its regional head office from Egypt to Tunisia, the only relatively stable nation in the region.

The Arab world might also implode because of severe economic crisis and absence of outlet (read democracy) for political anger. The Arab region will regress on many fronts and put the

67 Florence Gaub and Alexandra Laban (ed.) *Arab Futures: Three Scenarios for 2025*, op. cit.

development clock several decades back. The appearance of the ISIS in 2014 had thrown the whole region in complete disarray and its political and economic aftershocks will continue to linger even if it is eliminated because there are many other outfits which have all the potential to replace it. The issue of economic or political reform would have no appeal for the leadership because the region has reprioritized security and war against terror at the cost of democracy and freedom. The political role of military will increase because growing terrorism will be fought by the armed forces instead of intelligence and special task force. The role of GCC nations would increase in these regions, and it would move from being an observer to regional policy maker. The security budget is likely to increase in every nation that would hamper the social security of people. The welfare resource would be diverted to defense and military because of the threat and the much lauded security sector reform would no more be an issue.

Most of the nations would suffer from lower GDP growth because of poor social and political situations. The persistent economic crisis would lead to the removal of considerable part of subsidy – a pillar of welfare economic system in most nations – which, in turn, might lead to a mass revolt and Egypt is the most prone and most vulnerable to such a situation. Non-state actors would exploit the Sunni-Shiite divide to their benefit and sectarianism would serve as a tool for most of the states.

The different streams of political Islam (electoral, authoritarian and revolutionary) is likely to be a part of future regional political process and would be involved in zero sum game. There are numerous streams of Islam and one type of Islam would try to impose or dominate the others. The moderate Islamist might

turn towards radicalism and it will be a force not to be ignored. Liberal parties may also turn to some shade of radicalism and Islamism because of shrinking space for them in the existing political domain. Different traits of identities are in the process of formation and there is a constant overlap amongst them, like religious, regional and national identities are being redefined.

The security vacuum in the region ranging from Lebanon to Iraq to Syria to Egyptian Sinai to Algerian south to Libya and mountainous region of Tunisia would, in all likelihood, encourage illicit network of Jihadist and abet the drug trade similar to what is seen in the case of Afghanistan today. Regional insecurity is likely to spill over to other nations as well and that would be a collective nightmare. Piracy is likely to make a return after it was subdued in the last decade. The Kurdish issue, rehabilitation of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria and allaying the fears of Sunnis in the evolving regional architecture would be protracted problems in coming years.

It has been proved that the emergence of the ISIS is a symptom of power vacuum, social and political chaos and deepening sectarian identity in the wake of the Arab uprising. As far as the future of the ISIS in the region is concerned, it would largely depend upon how early the internal security issues and persisting political and economic instabilities are resolved. As long as there is no stability or strong political structure in the region, there is little hope of weakening of the ISIS and other Jihadist networks. One cannot remove or shrink its social base in the absence of a powerful state rendering its services and delivering good to the people. If the state fails to govern properly, the ISIS will have all the potential to embed in the society and erect a parallel state

system in the region. Both regional and global powers need to contain the growth of its globalized criminal economy to deter it from further consolidation.

No doubt, the ISIS has lost its rhetoric appeal because of its cruel behavior and it is likely to further erode, and its ideological appeal may not transcend the confines of the region where the states have almost failed. It is likely to see various ups and downs in the Arab region, and its complete elimination would require a multi-pronged war entwined with social and political reforms in the Arab world.

As far as the role of external powers is concerned, Russia is likely to deepen its engagement with the support of allies like Iran and Egypt. Even if the war comes to an end in Syria, Russia is not likely to reduce its presence, and the presence of terror networks would legitimize its prolonged stay there. Moreover, given the nature of war in the region in the last two decades, it is not likely that Russia or the US can declare, at any point, that their objective has been achieved and would depart. Russia will remain in the region in the name of fighting terrorism like the US is in Iraq or Afghanistan. Russia's apparent success in Syria is likely to intensify its strategic ambition in the future which might inspire other nations, like Egypt, to strengthen their ties with Russia and, subsequently, in the years to come, Russia might emerge as a major component of West Asia's security and political architecture. Russia's long term presence in the region has the potential to trigger a new war of influence between Europe and the US on one side and Russia on the other side. Iran and Egypt may likely seek Russian stay for a long period of

time in the region to counter the influence of Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

On the US front, President Trump has already begun implementing the election manifesto and the first major decision his new administration took was of banning the entry of Muslims in the US from seven Muslim-majority nations (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, and Somalia) and further banned refugees from all over the world. This course of policies is likely to worsen US relationship with the Muslim world further, which is already not in a very good shape. The move of Mr. Trump has also angered many Arabs for US's reluctant and skeptical roles in the region. Many have claimed that none of the nationals from banned nations were found involved in the attack on US territories, while Mr. Trump ignored nations like Saudi Arabia whose nationals have been indicted in the 9/11 attack report. But Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in his first foreign visit has made it clear that his policies in the coming months would be guided more by strategic choices rather than any short-term rhetoric. The visit has also indicated that those who are anticipating any form of disengagement of the US from the region are wrong in the assessment of US policies in the region.

Mr. Trump has already declared that his policy in the region would be to intensify the war against the ISIS and Islamic radical terror groups, which is likely to enhance further the military involvement of the US. The war against terror is likely to bring nations like Russia closer to the US and there is already convergence between them on the ISIS and several other issues. But it would be too early to comment, given unpredictability of bilateral ties between the two, on how Mr. Donald Trump

would respond to Iran's own war against the ISIS because his predecessor, Mr. Obama had no issue with Iran fighting its war against the ISIS. It is worth mentioning here that President Trump, in an interview, has said that his priority would be to fight the ISIS and this aligns him with the Syrian government, Iran and Russia.⁶⁸ More focus on security and terrorism in the region under the new administration is likely to affect the democratic project enunciated by the US for West Asia under President Bush a decade ago, which, until now, has been a major component of the US policy in the region.

The role of EU in the region would be guided by its security concern due to migration crisis which has emerged as a soft security threat for the whole continent. The constant chaos in the region would be a threat to its economic development, and trade with the region would be hampered if the situation does not improve or changes and security is not restored. The stability in the region becomes more important for the EU nations because of their dependence on the gas and oil of the region and, further, given the volatile relationship with Russia, the region would need more and more gas from the Arab world. The role of EU will also be important in carrying Iran's nuclear deal forward because it was a catalyst player in the deal. Its role becomes more important after the US and UK entered into a series of economic, defense and strategic deals with the GCC countries.

The EU is likely to remain an indissoluble part of anti-ISIS global coalition in the region because it had equally suffered because of the entrenchment of terrorism in the continent. Moreover, the role of EU is likely to remain very active and robust in the

68 <http://www.alternet.org/election-2016/donald-trumps-middle-east-policy-disaster>, (accessed February 5, 2017).

political process of nations like Libya which is Italy's next-door neighbor. Similarly, the role of Germany and France would grow after the victory of Macron in France and both are talking of evolving new security architecture in the region.

The issue of establishment of the state of Palestine will no more be a priority for the new administration unlike during President Obama, who constantly put pressure against Israel and more than often criticized its policy of settlement.⁶⁹ The state of Israel will further strengthen because of open support of President Trump, who has already stated that he would work for shifting Israel's capital to Jerusalem from hitherto Tel Aviv.⁷⁰ The nuclear deal with Iran is not likely to be reversed as presumed by many because the deal is not only between Iran and the US, but it involves the European powers and the UN. Moreover, the EU would not allow tampering with the deal because of its huge economic interests in the post-nuclear Iran. The western adventures against Iran, Russia and Libya have already become a major source of worry for those nations, which largely depend on Russia and the Gulf region for their energy requirements. But bilateral ties between the US and Iran might see further dip and the latest imposition of new sanction in retaliation to Iran's missile test has already set the course of their relationship, and now time would tell how both adversaries would move forward. The US position on Egypt is not likely to see substantial changes and Egypt would continue to work for the interest of US's main ally in the region: Israel. As far as US's policy towards the GCC nations is concerned, the new President is likely to maintain the status quo because any

69 Interview with Professor Mustafa in Cairo University, published in Arabic Daily, *Almisr-al-Yum*. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1040405>, (accessed November 20, 2016).

70 Ibid.

new experiment might open Pandora's box in the region which is already fraught with numerous crisis.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the region would be in deep chaos in the near future. The mayhem would not be merely informed by sectarian or ethnic divide as many are assuming, but there would be gradual appearance of other factors, rooted in the genealogy of the political and social history of the region, which would prove equally catalytic in weakening the regional state system and security architecture, which would have deep impact on global security. The growing complexity and subsequent interlocking of tangible and intangible factors would be a defining feature of the regional politics. What is more worrisome at the moment is the lack of cooperation on the part of respective leaders and rebel forces in the region with regard to regional and global initiatives to reach an early solution. The change in one country would impact the whole region. The intensification of geopolitical and geostrategic conflict will have great impact on the collective relationship and evolving power structure in the region.

No doubt, people have emerged as catalyst forces in the backdrop of the Arab uprising, but its entwinement with the emergence of weak states and proliferation of non-state actors has rendered the people's passions meaningless; instead, their political energies are being diverted towards either confronting the conflict or abetting the conflict with no political outcome. The rivalry among Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt will shape the future of the region. It has become more evident after President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia and his declaration of an open partnership with the GCC in its strategic war against Iran,

which has emboldened Saudi Arabia further. The country, in all likelihood, would compensate its loss of Iraq and weakening position in Syria and Yemen by showing assertive posture vis-a-vis Iran. But one cannot predict how effective it would be and how much it will benefit Saudi Arabia in strategic and political terms.

On the other hand, Iran might reach the pinnacle of power and would dictate security issues in the region, but it would depend upon how the internal politics of Iran moves during the second term of President Ruhani. However, Iran might face difficult situations too given the policy announcement of President Trump in the Riyadh Summit of June 2017 where he called upon the GCC partners to confront Iran's designs in the region. The region is likely to face new political, social, ideological and strategic realities and several major strategic trends would determine the regional order in the making; and the order is changing not because some states have become powerful, but because some of them have become weaker. Israel is less likely to overarch itself in the evolving political trajectory unless confronted with major challenge to its security, because the basic objective of Israel – security – is best served in the existing strategic and political scheme. As mentioned earlier, Israel is the biggest gainer and would not like to muddle in the current quagmire in the region unless some major strategic changes take place.

The biggest loser is likely to be the democratic aspirations of the masses, which had gathered people in millions for weeks in different parts of the region. Soon after the Arab uprising, the democratic urge of the people was overshadowed by persisting sectarian, tribal and regional divides across the region. For instance, Egypt is in full control of the army and there is no

imminent threat to the army. Moreover, there is no global hue and cry over the human rights issue or democratic credibility of the regime, and political opposition has almost vanished. The mainstream media is dominated by the issue of terrorism and security and there is no mention of democratic urge of the people.

No doubt, the Arabs have missed a great opportunity to build political institutions and it is very difficult to fix the blame for the present catastrophe. But many in Egypt and GCC nations are happy for the fact that their rulers rescued them from Syrian and Libya-like situations where millions have been displaced and thousands and thousands have been killed.

Lastly, the politics of the post-Arab uprising has defied the traditional notion of Arab unity and the region once again seems to be broken politically, intellectually, emotionally and strategically. Meanwhile, the Arab uprising and subsequent political evolution has proved the claim of some that the Arab world as a homogenous entity and united political force is hollow. It is not more than a combination of delusion and sloganeering. Each nation seems to be pursuing a new path concurring with its national, political and strategic ambitions.