

Collapse of the Arab world necessitates a regional solution

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The Arab world is in turmoil. The Arab Spring, which raised hopes and dreams for a wave of democratic reforms throughout the Middle East, is turning into a cold winter.

Egypt, once the pillar of the Arab states, has been on a political roller coaster since 2012. The country is occupied with a democratization dilemma, establishing security and responding to the nation's economic demands. These challenges will keep Cairo busy for the next decade trying to recover its traditional position as the leading state in the Arab world. It is noteworthy that Iran and Egypt, home to two of the world's oldest major civilizations, have been competing since the 1979 Iranian Revolution to exert their influence in the region.

Syria, once an Arab power, faces crisis and human tragedy on a monumental scale. The United Nations calls the situation of Syria's refugees (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/render/live/en/sites/almonitor/contents/articles/originals/2014/07/syria-refugees-zaatari-jordan-women-domestic-violence.html>) the "greatest humanitarian tragedy" (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/18/us-syria-crisis-aid-idUSBRE9BH0S620131218>) of our times." According to a European Commission fact sheet (http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf) published in June, 10.8 million people affected by the crisis are in need of humanitarian assistance. Close to 7 million are internally displaced, and almost 3 million have fled the country. More than 160,000 have lost their lives, and many thousands have been injured. All international efforts to end the civil war and sectarian conflict have failed, and there is no sign of peace on the horizon. Against this backdrop, Iran's main objective has remained preventing the total collapse of Syria (<http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/pages/articledetails.aspx?aid=602>).

Iraq, another Arab power, is on the brink of disintegration, descending toward a failed state. Sectarian conflicts are tearing the country apart. The Islamic State (<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930325001425>), the Salafist jihadist group, has taken over several cities and towns in Syria and Iraq and has declared a caliphate. Many observers maintain that politically polarized Iraq, threatened

by the coalition of extremist Sunni groups and Baathist remnants, may cease to exist as a nation and a state. Iran is investing a tremendous amount of resources toward preventing the disintegration of Iraq and its falling into the hands of extremists.

In the absence of engagement on the part of Iran and Iraq, two established regional powers in the Persian Gulf, the 33-year-old Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has become dysfunctional and disabled. In practical terms, it has collapsed. In March, following an unprecedented rift within the GCC, the nations of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recalled their ambassadors from, Doha, the Qatari capital. The three states were furious at Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood, which ideologically challenges the principle of conservative dynastic rule in the Persian Gulf. Oman, another GCC member, is experiencing tense relations with Saudi Arabia due to its mediating role between the Americans and Iranians.

Iranians believed from the outset of the peace process that it would fail due to Israeli policies. For decades, the Arab world was outraged over the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and relied on the United States to protect Palestinian rights. By the emergence of the Arab Spring, Arabs had become paralyzed. Also, with Israeli opposition to a two-state solution, the peace talks (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/29/world/middleeast/arc-of-a-failed-deal-how-nine-months-of-mideast-talks-ended-in-dissarray.html?_r=0) collapsed (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/29/world/middleeast/arc-of-a-failed-deal-how-nine-months-of-mideast-talks-ended-in-dissarray.html?_r=0). The Arabs no longer challenge the United States over its unconditional support of Israel.

Israeli military forces began pounding the Gaza Strip (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/human-suffering-gaza-religious-war.html>) in early July. 1,422 Palestinians have been killed (<http://www.thedailystar.net/death-toll-hits-1-422-35334>) and 200,000 displaced. More than 1,000 Palestinian homes have been destroyed. While Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee, describes Israeli actions as "war crimes" and a "deliberate massacre" (<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2014/07/plos-hanan-ashrawi-deliberate-massacre-in-gaza/>), "the Arab world has done nothing to defend the Palestinians. Israeli President Shimon Peres asserted, "This war is characterized by one thing — there is no more Arab world against Israel" (<http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/society/38655-140730-shimon-peres-gaza-must-be-returned-to-mahmoud-abbas>). This shift has resulted in the marginalization of the Palestinian problem and the Arab League losing its relevance.

Meanwhile, Libya is officially a failed state (<http://rt.com/op-edge/176376-libya-officially-failed-state/>), and Yemen, another important Arab country, is on the verge of becoming a (<http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2820/yemen-failed-state>) failed state (<http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2820/yemen-failed-state>), tottering on the edge of a potentially bloody and devastating civil war (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/yemen-politics-left-reemergence.html>) that would wreak havoc on the country's fragile economy, people, and system.

Threatened by the Islamic State, which has captured vast lands in Syria and western Iraq, Saudi Arabia has recently deployed 30,000 troops along its border with Iraq. Ironically, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, the Islamic State's previous incarnation) was funded for several years (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/saudi-arabia-iraq-long-history-suspicion.html>) by wealthy donors in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, initially in the hope of challenging Iraq's Shiite-dominated political structure and later of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria to curb Iran's influence and strategic depth. The monster they created has now been unleashed, and may soon be hunting them.

On July 4, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a man with a \$10 million bounty (<http://www.voanews.com/content/us-has-10m-bounty-on-isil-leader-it-previously-held/1951892.html>) on his head, appeared in public to lead hundreds of Muslims in Friday prayers in the grand mosque of Mosul, showing no sign of fear. He had days before declared himself the leader of the new Islamic caliphate and demanded obedience from all Muslims. Since the notion of a caliphate does not recognize the nation-state system, Baghdadi is openly challenging the legitimacy of all Arab rulers, and more immediately, the Arab kingdoms and governments in the Middle East.

The new US policy in the Middle East departs from the policies of the past decades whereby it does not wish to heavily invest money and blood for the long term. Meanwhile, the United States' hegemonic position in the region is on the verge of collapse. Because of the current crises in the region, Washington cannot count on its Arab allies nor can US allies count on the United States as a superpower capable of helping them confront the challenges they are facing. US President Barack Obama is clever enough to remain cautious about embroiling the United States in new adventures. While the key regional players — Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan — struggle with domestic challenges, a new geostrategy encompassing the following elements is urgently needed:

1. Asian powers, that is China and India, in cooperation with Russia and Iran need to play a more active

role.

2. The two pillars of future stability in the region — Iran and Turkey — should take on broader responsibilities.
3. The United States needs to implement a major shift in its approach to Iran, ending their cycle of hostility.
4. The Iranian nuclear dossier, the unnecessary and manufactured crisis, should be closed in the shortest time possible.
5. A dialogue addressing regional crises between Tehran and Washington should be established.
6. A war on terror should top the agenda of the key regional and international powers.
7. A regional cooperation system among Iran, Iraq and the GCC should be established to maintain peace, security and stability in the Gulf.
8. A new structure for broader regional peace and stability should be developed immediately.

Iran has continuously warned the international community about the potential trans-borders threat of Salafist jihadists (<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930323000398>). The emergence of existential threats to Syria and Iraq, the wave of change set in motion by the Arab Spring, the rise of terrorism, civil and sectarian wars sweeping across the Middle East (and Africa), the US withdrawal from Iraq and possibly Afghanistan, the transition of ISIS into the Islamic State and declaration of a caliphate and the growing number of extremists could potentially alter the Middle East's geopolitical landscape and bring the nation-state order in the Arab world and the region to the verge of collapse.

Effective measures to prevent such a scenario should become a priority of the international community. Iran and the United States can and should play a major role in this respect.

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