

What Might the Middle East Look by 2025?

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Introduction

Looking long into the future with any confidence requires gazing at a crystal ball of a nature that we do not possess. The challenge is further magnified by the nature of the Middle East, a region well known for its high volatility and dramatic turns and shifts in direction. Even more importantly, we doubt that the Middle East future is sufficiently deterministic that anyone can compellingly describe what it is going to look like in two decades. Furthermore, we submit that the character of Middle East in two decades can still be largely shaped by both its inhabitants and outside forces working either together, or independently, toward a common goal or at cross purposes. The outcome of such interaction is virtually impossible to predict.

Faced with these daunting constraints, perhaps the best that we can hope to accomplish is to describe some of the most meaningful with emphasis on the alarming **trends** presently identifiable in the region, and a few prominent dilemmas and challenges that they will pose for the key regional and extra regional. We do so out of a conviction that the efforts that the interaction between the undercurrents described below and the strategies employed for addressing them will eventually determine what the Middle East looks like in 2025.

The Trends

Four things are virtually certain:

- The Middle East will gain rather than lose in strategic importance between now and 2025.

The region's share of oil production will rise from less than 30% today to more than 40% in 2025. (Saudi Arabia alone is expected to account for half of the Gulf production at that time.) The proliferation of WMD (especially nuclear weapons) and their delivery systems in the region is much more likely to increase than to decrease. The concentration so of much of the world's financial wealth in the hands of a handful Gulf based Sovereign Wealth Funds would similarly enhance the importance of the region. And finally the historical role of the region as the transit route to Asia will not go away, but if anything increase through an ever tightening web of aviation and maritime links and hubs, as well as oil and gas pipelines.

- The current “youth bulge” will not yet be absorbed and may have major effects absent a profound political change.

Even though fertility rates are likely to decline, the overall population of the Middle East will grow by nearly 40%, from 388 to 537 million, and the working age population will grow by almost 50%. In 2025, the proportion of individuals aged 15 to 29 will still be 40% or greater in Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Assuming mass exodus of this young population beyond the region will be difficult if not entirely impossible, their pressure on the governments and demands on resources for schooling, housing, employment, and a measure of influence over their destiny is going to prove a powerful catalysts for change, either for better, or potentially also for the worst,

- The “leadership transition” that started in the late 1990s will be completed, with the disappearance from the scene of the generation of autocrats that came to power in the 1970s and early 1980s – the last remaining ones being Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gadaffi.

Such a transition can be benign (as was the case in Jordan, Morocco, and to a large extent Syria), but may also spell trouble: the sons will not always enjoy the same legitimacy or governance skill as their fathers did.

- The growing long-term demand for oil and gas will ensure that some countries in the region – Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran in particular – will benefit from high revenues from exports of hydrocarbons.

However, some like Iran and Iraq will only benefit from this manna if they able to modernize their production infrastructure between now and 2025, retain a measure of physical security over the oil wells, the pipelines, the export terminals, and the maritime export routes, and simultaneously rationalize their domestic demand.

But perhaps the most powerful factor that might shape the Middle East scene over the next two decades is the **ever growing overall scarcity of resources and the deteriorating infrastructure and environment** in most Middle East states. Most countries in the region, especially in the Arab world, seem likely to fall further behind the developed world: they will be poorer overall (with remaining wealth highly unevenly spread), and more poorly educated (in terms of both quality and access to significant segments of the population). They will be over populated and especially over urbanized, with ever more heterogenic population. They will be more polluted, drier, hence also increasingly arid and dehydrated. The annual per capita water availability is expected to drop by about 40% by 2025. Finally, they will have a decaying and outdated infrastructure.

These forces are likely to increase the demands the population of most countries of their governments while also leading to further resectorialization of societies along ethnic, religious, economic and ideological lines. Some of these groupings will probably profess allegiance to causes well beyond their boundaries, and many could well display a mixture of hostility toward the other internal factions as well as growing alienation with the state.

A related factor is the diminishing governability of Middle East nation states. This is likely to happen in part due to the adverse impact of the above forces on the cohesion of nation states, and in part due to the impact on the region of broader forces of globalization and climate change. The latter's might involve especially harsh impact on hot climate areas and states bordering on the sea. Taken together, these forces are likely to weaken further, possibly even undermine altogether the allegiance of significant segments of the public to their authoritarian national governments.

They also seem set to undermine the efficacy of the latter and their hold over their publics and territory, be it physically over the movements of goods and people (e.g. Lebanon, Egypt) and/or virtually over extreme weather, information, ideas, and "battle cries", (all). This is bound to give rise to an ever more pronounced manifestation of failed states, de facto autonomous regions and lawless areas. Moreover, it is bound to create much more elbow room for the activity of non state actors ranging from terrorists and pirates to NGOs making these entities even more pervasive and influential in (and from) the Middle East than they have ever been.

The third significant force likely to shape the face of the Middle East in the years to come is further proliferation of certain categories of advanced conventional munitions. Here we do not primarily envisage dissemination of main battle tanks, aircraft, and artillery but rather the smaller, more mobile and less transparent rockets and smaller anti tank and anti aircraft missiles, ultra lights and UAVs, fast naval crafts, and high explosives in abundance, including of the ever more sophisticated charges of the nature that has grown so common in the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon (especially in the hands of Hezbollah as well as in the hands of narcotics growers and smugglers elsewhere around the world). This proliferation may well eventually include also and crude nuclear explosive devices and in extreme cases even loose nuclear weapons. But regardless whether the arsenals of these private armies eventually grow to include also weapons of mass destruction, even the marriage solely of their conventional capabilities and asymmetric tactics may suffice to empower them dramatically, especially against frail states, and to greatly extend their reach and potential menace. The exponential growth of Somali maritime piracy in the vicinity of Aden is just one manifestation of the destabilizing global potential inherent in this phenomenon.

In this context, the scenario where a non-State entity with mastery of a significant ungoverned area has weapons of mass destruction in its possession is a real possibility. Given the uncertainties that would exist regarding the functioning of classical deterrence in such a scenario, this would raise new problems regarding the legitimacy of preventive or preemptive use of force.

A fourth likely development is the nuclearization of the Middle East – either in a “hedging” perspective or in an overt fashion – coupled with their long range delivery capability. To be sure, notwithstanding the desires of some regional powers (initially by Egypt, and subsequently by Iraq, Libya, Syria, and most recently Iran), little has happened to date to break the status quo prevailing in the region since the 1960s. But the Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons capability, coupled with the potential nuclear assistance to the region from the outside, most prominently from Pakistan and the DPRK, threatens to undermine this state of affairs. Unless defused soon, it is rather likely that further Iranian progress towards (and certainly beyond) a threshold state status is likely to bring about in rapid succession the nuclearization of several additional countries in the region (from Saudi Arabia and Egypt to Turkey) one way or the other. Some countries in the region will choose to seek a nuclear umbrella for themselves from extra-regional powers, or some form of protection and alliance with one of the nuclear players in the region, rather than go nuclear themselves; but since it needs to be assumed that Western countries would, by definition, have failed to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon capability, **the lack of trust in the United States and its allies may become such that threatened countries would not satisfy themselves with mere soothing words of reassurance.** At the minimum, serious passive defenses, domestic security assistance, and perhaps even the presence of foreign nuclear weapons would be desired to make such guarantees credible.

In passing, it is worth noting that the nuclearization trends is rather likely to stem further the limited effort to acquire less formidable WMD capabilities as the "poor men atom bomb", evident to date in a few countries of the region. Put differently, if and when nuclear weapons become the currency of trade in the region, the appeal of other--lesser-- forms is likely to diminish greatly, though the same cannot be said for either ballistic (and eventually cruise) missiles (IRBMs and even beyond), missile defense, and advanced conventional capabilities, including in space assets. These are likely to assume much greater appeal for the regional parties, and an arms race in these domains is likely to unfold.

Finally, in our assessment **the continuation of current trends is further likely to accelerate the fragmentation process of the Middle East** as a region. This is ,after all, a region that has all along been characterized by limited regional coherence, strong centrifugal forces, and intense meddling by extra regional forces would likely undergo a process of further disaggregation, disintegration and penetration by extra-regional players. In the process, it would probably lose any remaining significance as a unique and somewhat coherent political entity and unit of analysis. It is likely to be gradually transformed into a swath of land or geographical designation fragmented into national and even sub-national entities. Turkey and the Maghreb will be more integrated into Europe. Iraq and Lebanon will be fragmented or weak. Countries of the Arabian peninsula will look to Asia. The choices that will be made by Libya, Egypt and Syria are uncertain. But it is likely, in any case, that the unity of the Arab world will no longer exist – if it ever has. (It is likely, in particular, that the Arab League will lose its relevance.)

In the process, it looks rather likely that **the extra regional players having a significant influence on the Middle East scene will grow in number and change in character**, with Asian players in general (China, India, Pakistan, and to a lesser extent both Koreas), and non state actors in particular assuming greater importance relative to the traditional players, namely the US, Russia, the UK, and France. We hasten to add that the present concentration in the Gulf of ever greater global wealth, energy resources (both oil and gas), global transportation hubs, and global media acumen (Al Jezira, Al Arabiya), and even human capital is likely to prove a stronger than ever incentive for many extra-regional players to try influence the shape of things to come in The Middle East. **The mere fact that the Middle East will host an increasing percentage of the world's oil and gas reserves as well as huge capital reserves (and related buying power) ensures that no global player will be able to stay away from the region, one way or the other.**

Accidents and strategic surprises will probably happen. Given the prevalence of conflict in the region (one or two wars per decade on average since 1945), armed conflicts remains likely. More than one country will face the risk or collapse and/or a revolution. A war triggered (voluntarily or inadvertently) by Iran may heighten the sectarian divide between the Shi'a and Sunni worlds, with domestic ripple effects in many countries in the region. But the centrality of the region as the cradle of all three monotheistic religions and the abundance of holy places for worshippers of these religions suggests that the consequences of conflicts in the region will reverberate well beyond the Middle East. On the other hand, positive developments, such as a democratic evolution of Iran would also be a transformative event, welcome in the long term but potentially highly unsettling for more authoritarian regimes in the neighborhood in the near term.

Finally, Middle East politics will continue to be influenced to some extent by the Palestinian issue. Failure to create a viable Palestinian State by 2025 – when the generation that knew the 1947-1948 events will have disappeared – will continue to poison the relationship between the Muslim and the Western world. On the other hand, such a creation could also become a destabilizing event in the short to Middle run, by forcing many governments in the region to focus on domestic challenges – they would no longer be able to blame Israel and the West for their own failures.

Strategies

Many of the forces described above are already in play today. But **their impact is more limited than it could or would be in the years to come**, assuming no meaningful and successful efforts (by regional and/or extra regional powers) are undertaken to confront and address them in the interim. For now we see little evidence that any of the regional parties is showing any awareness of these longer term trends, limited capacity to deal by itself even with their short term manifestations, and even lesser willingness to collaborate with the others to deal with the long term implications. In fact, all that we can see in play at present are a few strategies that have already been adopted or envisaged by players of the region to try protecting themselves again unsettling developments in the region, these being:

- “Virtual relocation” from their immediate surroundings (Israel, the GCC states)
- Integration with the region and with outlying regions (Turkey)
- Domination of the region (Iran)
- Containment through physical separation, economic pressure, deterrence (practiced thus far most successfully by Israel)
- Authoritarian isolationism coupled with selective (sectorial, mainly economic engagement) "Chinese style" (e.g. Egypt)
- Building an artificial island of prosperity (UAE, Qatar, Bahrain)

Most countries will be tempted to just “muddle through”. **But it is dubious that this will be a sustainable strategy** given the magnitude of the political, economic, social and strategic challenges that they will face. Whatever happens, the Middle East is certain to undergo very significant changes over the next 15 years.

Some of these strategies are or may be tried simultaneously, a few might be sustained while others tried and abandoned quickly. It is quite likely though (at least insofar that this is the default option) that there will be less than perfect coordination or even compatibility between the strategies the relevant regional players they pursue at any given time. For now, these strategies are sustaining the Gulf States, Turkey and Israel as islands of relative affluence and stability, while the rest of the region is falling further behind on most of the attributes listed above. It is not surprising that the successful players lie at the external edges of the region, hence have some better ability to buffer themselves from its most disconcerting trends. But it is an open question whether they can continue to do so over the long run (especially when looking two decades ahead) with equal degree of success over the long run. This question is especially acute for the Gulf States, notwithstanding their current oil and gas affluence and prosperity.

As for the extra-regional players, it is difficult at this time to how any of them would be willing to assume an even more sustained serious commitment toward the stability of the region, be it through investment of extensive scarce and precious resources, forward presence, or. In fact, it is rather likely that they will continue to pursue in the region primarily their own particularistic interests (access to gas and oil, arms transfers, counter-terrorism, aiding one or another ally, etc). And notwithstanding their professed commitment to the contrary (such as to the peaceful resolution of the Arab Israeli conflict), in practice their proclivity is toward engaging in the region's broader or endemic problems only reluctantly, intermittently, and selectively. This is likely to be the fate across the entire range of challenges plaguing the region: from governance, democratization and human rights, to nuclear proliferation and regional security, and from urbanization and impoverishment to desertification and dehydration.

The mismatch between the gravity of the problems the Middle East region is likely to face over the next two decades and the strategies in place (or that are most likely be adopted by the key players) **to confront them could not be greater.** The bottom line, nevertheless, is neither pre-determined, nor is it bound to be entirely discouraging. While the Middle East is on course to becoming more unruly and chaotic in the long term, there still is ample room for intervention that would change its course and prevent these pessimistic scenarios from materializing.

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