



A New Security Architecture for the Middle East?

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The Middle East broke all records for surprise events in 2019. The unexpected changes of government in Algeria and Sudan, mass protests in Lebanon and Iraq, the sensational election outcome in Tunisia, the never-ending election process in Israel, a new escalation of US–Iran tensions, zigzagging developments in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and many more – the list may be continued. At the same time, this is not the first time it happens. The situation in the region tended to be changeable in the past as well, and surprise and randomness have long become the landmark of the Middle East political process – as may be clearly seen yet again at the beginning of 2020.

This is probably why someone who originally came from the Middle East, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a Lebanese-American risk analyst, essayist, and economist of Antiochian Greek descent, invented the black swan theory. The black swan theory describes events overturning the natural course of development that have three key characteristics: they come as a surprise, have a major effect, and are often rationalized after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. The Arab Spring, armed conflicts and diplomatic crises, revolutions and coups, having stunned the international community at first, were provided with so many explanations later that they came to be seen as perfectly logical and even as the only possible outcome of undercover processes or events that had not been taken into account.

But maybe this is not so, and the suddenness of these events was not the result of faulty political optics but rather a fundamental feature of social development? The baffling interplay of causality and absence of causes, which has long been a feature of the Middle East, has created a surprising combination of changeability and invariability of political reality. There is a constant whirlwind of events, and yet nothing ever seems to change. Surprise developments can transform regional reality overnight despite the sluggish pace of everyday political life. The routine is interrupted by breakthroughs and rapid development, which in turn leads to chaos that becomes a new stability.

This seems to stultify any political forecasting. However, scenarios may acquire a new meaning if we take into account Taleb's theory or the law of unanticipated consequences popularized by sociologist Robert K. Merton, and if we stop trying to calculate the probability of forecasts to the decimal approximation. We can use these scenarios as red flags marking the realm of the probable, while keeping in mind that reality can turn the probability scale upside down.

Tricky Dichotomies, Contradictions, and Other Development Drivers

Considering the ongoing transformation, there are a number of basic and increasingly important dichotomies underpinning the developments that undermine stability and are fraught with unpredictable consequences for the region.

Unitarism vs decentralization is one such dichotomy.

The age-old nature of this binary pair becomes obvious when looking at how the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East evolve, pulling new actors into their orbit. It also explains why this region is so prone to insurmountable conflicts. The permanent nature of this binary opposition serves as a driver for unrelenting struggles among local players, including armed conflicts. External actors seek to benefit from this by imposing their agendas on the conflicting sides and pursuing their own interests, which more often than not have little if anything in common with the interests of these conflicting parties.

Decentralization could seem as a logical and inevitable solution for countries within the region that have been torn apart by conflict, including Syria, Libya, or Yemen. It could also help overcome the latent or quashed conflicts in a number of countries in the Middle East. The list of candidates could be quite long, but it is up to the countries themselves to resolve the problem or place it on its agenda in order to prevent future complications. That being said, Iraq's partial transition to a federal structure did not help stabilize the country. It did, however, stop the Arab-Kurdish conflict, which had lasted for many years. At the same time, the United Arab Emirates use a federal model that has been sustainable and ensured stability and high growth rates.

Developments over the recent months inspire some optimism in terms of overcoming the intense struggle of opposing minority groups in their fight for greater autonomy within their respective states against governments unwilling to accommodate their demands and fearing secessionist aspirations. Compromises achieved by external actors who are working together to stop violence and bring the conflicting parties

to the negotiating table have an essential role. In this context, it is worth mentioning the January 2020 agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to promote a ceasefire in Libya, as well as in Syria's Idlib province, although this did not prevent the leaders of the conflicting sides in Libya from backing out of signing a truce in Moscow on January 13, 2020.

This problem is related to a broader issue of ensuring the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, which has a direct bearing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict itself is broader in scope. It has both a pan-Arabic and international (interstate) dimensions. Still, the struggle between Palestinian Arabs and Jews for control over the Palestinian land is at its core. US President Donald Trump's unilateral steps in this conflict clearly do nothing to bring about a solution along the lines traced by UN Security Council resolutions. In addition, these initiatives could make even the prospect of a solution impossible. The Trump peace plan, or the 'deal of the century', announced by Washington January 28, 2020, hardly inspires optimism. The project to establish an unviable state of New Palestine, which is clearly unacceptable for Palestinians, proves that any attempt to carry out this plan would do nothing but escalate tensions.

Secularism vs religiosity is another dichotomy.

The region presents a wide range of state models, from theocratic regimes (Islamic Republic of Iran) to those that enshrined the secular nature of the state in the constitution. While Turkey is the only member of the latter group, it is a paradox that it is in this country that the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party, which has gained the support of majority of the people in a series of democratic elections, is the one that stands for a soft version of Islamism. Iran, with its Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) doctrine of statehood, has nevertheless all the functioning democratic institutions, including the parliament, political parties, electoral system, etc. Lebanon stands apart with its quotas system for the representation of various confessional groups within the government. Here, the Maronite community plays an important role while Shia military and political institutions (e.g. Hezbollah as a sub-state actor) are gaining ground. This heightens tensions within the country, enabling outside forces to benefit from this environment in order to undermine stability. Representatives of the Syrian government insisted on establishing a secular state in Syria following the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, while the Islam-oriented part of the opposition strongly opposed this.

This already complex and contradictory landscape would not be complete if we left out of the equation radical jihadist groups (banned in Russia), including the tens of thousands of armed fighters who remain in the Idlib province. At the same time, ISIS failed in its attempts to build its own ugly model of statehood.

Speaking of the ambiguity of transformation processes in the region, we cannot fail to mention the far-reaching reforms in Saudi Arabia, promoted by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. However, anywhere you look there is always a segment of society that opposes reforms, and reformers find it challenging at times to override this opposition, even when having the government machine behind them, and Saudi Arabia is not an exception.

Naturally, not all the contradictions that determine the regional landscape can be described in binary opposition terms. There are also a great number of other increasingly urgent challenges that should have been addressed a long time ago. These include imbalances in resources, miscalculations and failures in nation building, lack of an effective social contract, deficit of effective governance institutions, as well as the failure to create a regional security architecture.

Each of these problems is complex and multifaceted. However, identifying them would not be enough for formulating future scenarios. It is essential that the specific nature of the Middle East region with its multitude of actors operating at various levels, from local to global, and from local tribal militias and religious groups to governments, from religious communities to transnational corporations, be taken into account. There is a unique narrative for each of these actors, while they interact with one another outside of any institutional frameworks.

Against this backdrop, a plethora of diverse drivers affect the region's development. Some of them reflect fundamental challenges and trends, while others are momentary or even accidental. Still, in the medium term there is a balance between the fundamental and incidental factors. All these factors can be divided into four main groups.

The first group consists of fundamental factors relating to lasting historical processes and mostly dealing with socioeconomic and environmental concerns on both regional and global scale, including resources, demographic and gender imbalances, water and food scarcity, etc. These factors have always affected regional development in one way or another, but over the past

years they gained a political dimension, affecting the regional and national development agendas. For instance, various political forces have often exploited the water deficit problem, which lies in the basis of a number of conflicts. While the Arab Spring uprising may have been caused at the outset by demographic imbalances or natural disasters, other fundamental factors came to the fore as these processes unfolded, including gender inequality and a considerable deterioration of the quality of life. In fact, more and more people in the Middle East are no longer willing to tolerate inequalities of this kind. Environmental deterioration has become another vital factor. These challenges were among the key drivers of the 2019 protests.

The second group covers ideological and political factors. On the one hand, these include the lack and deficiency of institutions in terms of enabling national political systems to overcome the existing and emerging challenges and threats, as well as the readiness to launch and continue urgent reforms, and promote post-conflict recovery of governance institutions. On the other hand, this group also includes factors of a purely ideological nature. It was a common belief several years ago that ideology no longer mattered in today's world. Yet, the developments in the Middle East over the past years have proved otherwise. Ideology is back. In the 2010s, public opinion across the region focused primarily on matters of ideology, making cultural and civilizational choices, and setting national development strategies. This is what the standoff between the Islamists and secular forces in 2011–2013 was all about, and the same applies to the religious and sectarian struggles that followed, in addition to attempts of national re-consolidation in a number of states over the past two years. The same questions were central to shaping the new regional balances.

The third group consists of international, military, and political factors related to conflicts, as well as foreign policy strategies adopted by regional and global actors.

Finally, the fourth group of factors includes the so-called existential spoilers, i.e. anti-system forces and political leaders who came into the spotlight at the time of turbulence and weak institutions.

Considering the challenging nature of the dichotomies, the complexity of contradictions, the specific regional landscape, and the diversity of development drivers, a wide range of development scenarios can be imagined for the region, while always keeping in mind that a black swan event can happen any moment.

Scenarios for Subregions

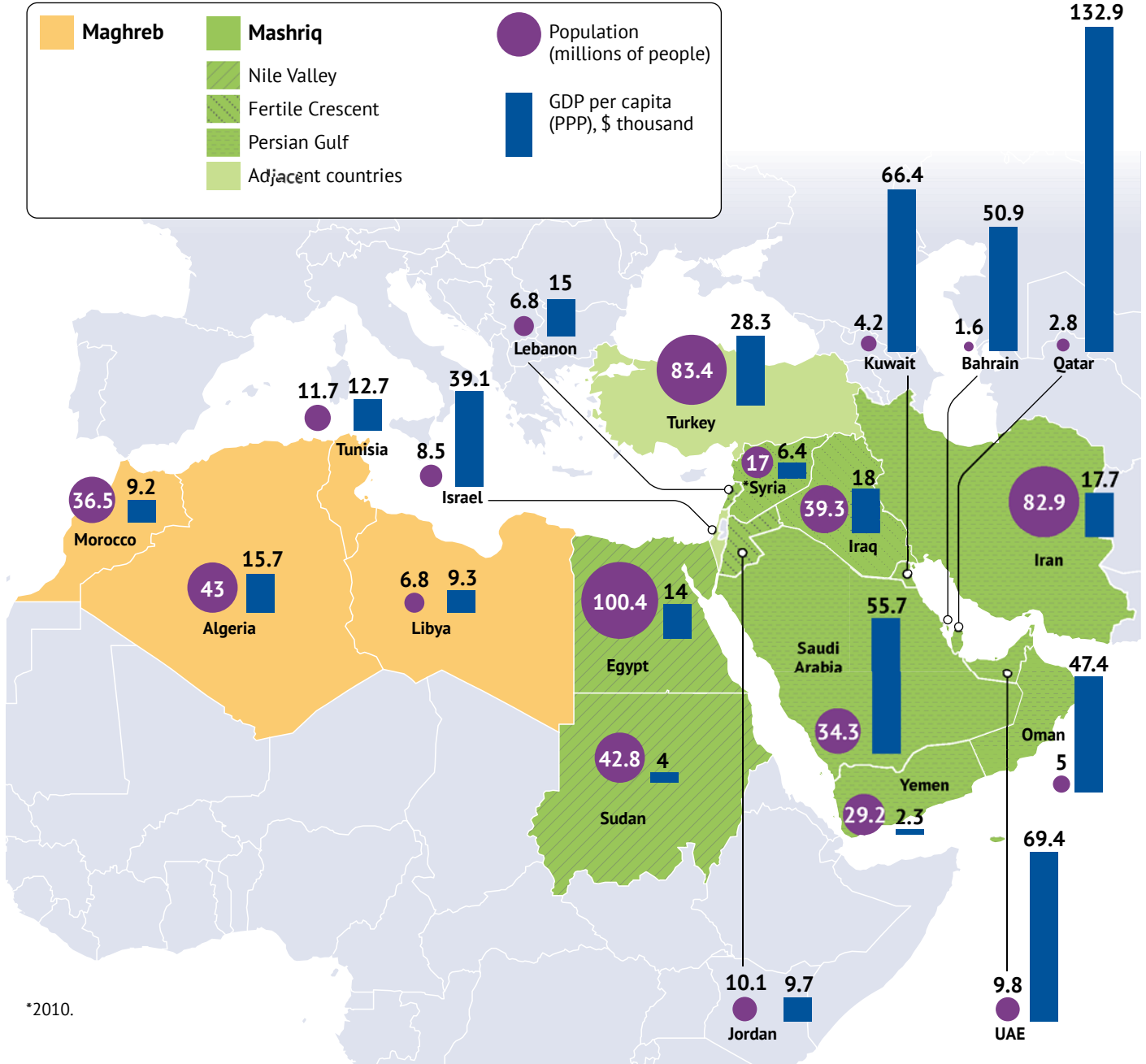
The analysis of these scenarios should proceed from the bottom up (from national, international, and subregional to regional level), because the majority of regional development factors have to do with the basic problems of individual societies and states rather than the global agenda. Consequently, developments in individual countries will determine the developments in the subregions and subsequently in the whole of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

MENA, which developed into an integral political region in the 20th century, is divided historically into the Maghreb (Northwest Africa) and the Mashriq (the eastern part of the Arab world, located in Western Asia and eastern North Africa). The Mashriq, which apart from Arab countries also includes Israel, Turkey, and Iran, consists of three subregions: the Nile Valley (Egypt and Sudan), the Fertile Crescent (Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq), and the Persian Gulf (Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Iran, and Iraq), with Yemen in the latter subregion's sphere of influence.

Although this division is a matter of convention (Iraq and Jordan are listed in two subregions, while Turkey and Israel, although formally not part of the Fertile Crescent, are involved in the processes underway there), the countries comprising these subregions have clearly similar historical, social, economic, and political features, which underlie the internal integrity of each subregion but also serve to distinguish them from one another. The dynamic of the political processes unfolding there in the past few years is sufficient only for partial forecasting of interdependent development trends in these subregions. The developments in the Gulf and Fertile Crescent countries have a major impact on each other and also indirectly influence the developments in Egypt and Sudan and, to a much lesser degree, in the Maghreb countries. At the same time, a negative scenario for the Nile Valley countries can affect all countries in the region.

The interdependence of developments in the Gulf and Fertile Crescent subregions is and will remain asymmetric in the foreseeable future. On the one hand, the Fertile Crescent countries are a target of influence for Gulf countries, while on the other – they remain a source of threats and challenges, as well as geostrategic and human resources for them. This asymmetry means that the developments in the Gulf will continue to have a decisive impact on the Fertile Crescent subregion, as well as, though to a lesser degree, on the Nile Valley countries.

SUBREGIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



Sources: UN (2019), IMF (2019).

The Expanded Mashriq

Negative Scenarios: The Pendulum

The main causes for a negative scenario for the eastern part of MENA are the persisting Iran–Saudi tensions, a fragile socio-political stability in these countries, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen. The probability of this scenario rests on the security dilemma in Iran–Saudi relations, the belief of each of them in its decisive victory, as well as Washington’s traditional reliance on disagreements between the regional actors. At the same time, the developments of the past few months show that the positions of all the key players are gradually changing. Iran and Saudi Arabia, which came to the brink of a big war at least twice in 2019–2020, demonstrated the ability to quickly de-escalate tensions and rethink their reckless foreign policies.

The Saudi leaders’ striving to implement vital socio-political reforms and Iran’s need to stand up against tough economic sanctions forces their ruling elites to shift the focus to the domestic political agenda and to act more cautiously on the international stage. At the same time, the ongoing process of national consolidation and the military and political investments they have made in the Yemeni conflict, as well as in the Fertile Crescent countries, make a complete revision of their foreign policies unlikely and force them to maintain tension in bilateral relations.

The balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia is contributing to a negative international environment, creating a multitude of explosive situations, and also spreading rivalry among the Arab states of the Gulf to other regions (Yemen and Libya), which prevents settlement of conflicts.

Relations between the GCC states, first of all, between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (plus Egypt), on the one hand, and Qatar on the other, are a major gauge of developments under this scenario. Taken together, this makes any improvement in the Fertile Crescent countries practically impossible. Their development can proceed only under either a negative or a catastrophic scenario.

A negative scenario nearly amounts to maintaining the status quo. It includes failure to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict, which is fraught

with a new aggravation in light of the upcoming elections in 2021. The ability to prevent this will largely depend on the Syrian government's approach to the settlement of the conflict and to Syria's post-conflict development. Syria's post-conflict success depends on improving governance and fight against corruption, racketeering, and the shadow economy, which flourished in some parts of the country during the conflict. Failure to deal with these social ills will prevent an effective post-conflict recovery even with substantial foreign economic assistance. Lastly, the prevention of a new escalation will largely depend on the ability of the Syrian government to reconsolidate the people and carry through their post-conflict rehabilitation.

The unsettled Syrian conflict and ongoing Iran–Saudi confrontation will serve as a backdrop for the increasingly negative developments in Lebanon and Iraq, which will likely revitalize the issue of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence and aggravate the Kurdish problem in other regional countries. Moreover, a possible separation of Kurdistan and political reconfiguration in other regions of Iraq would give rise to a new round of power struggle between the elite groups, as well as civil unrest.

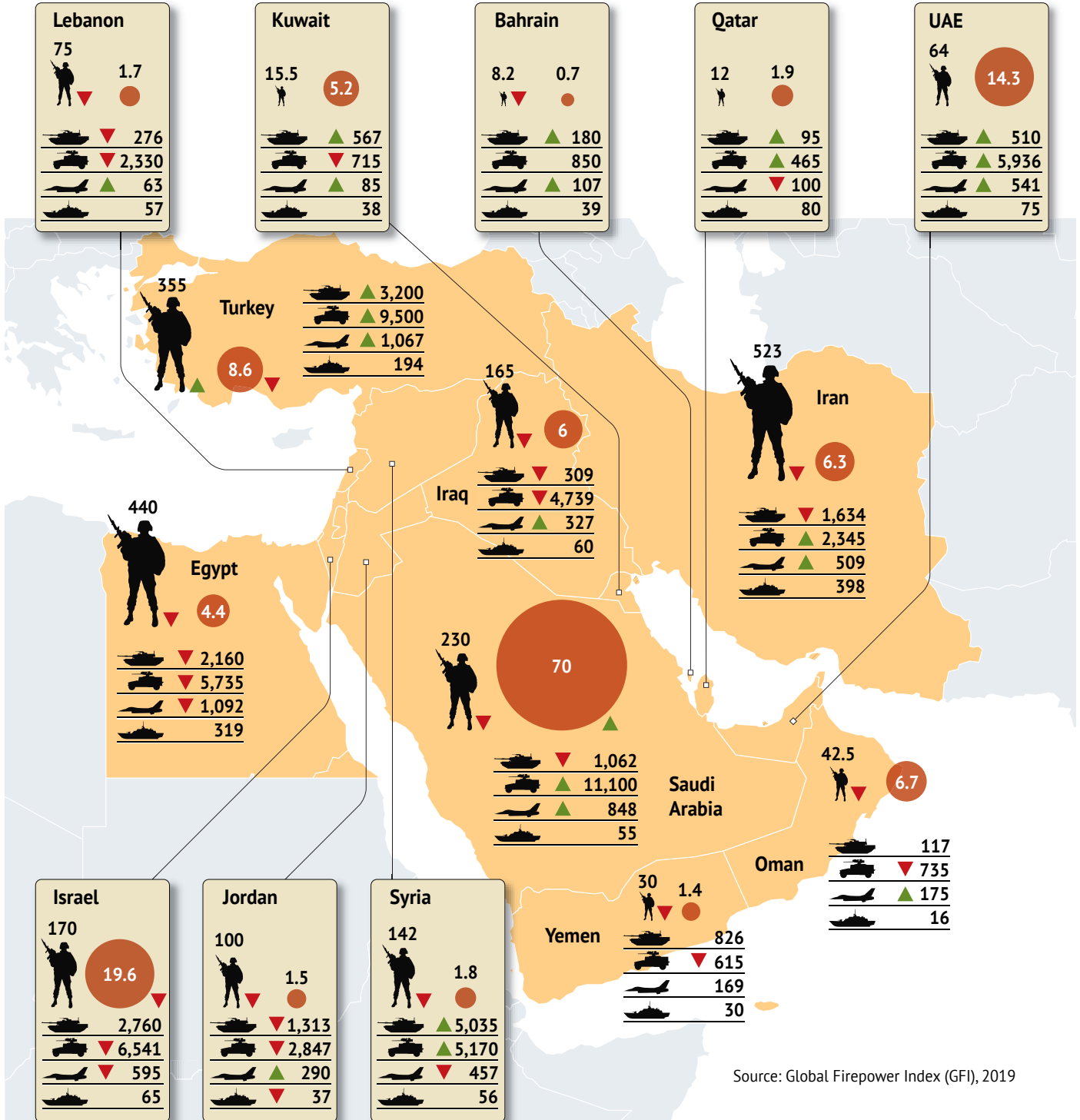
Such developments in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq would marginalize the issue of the Middle East settlement in global politics and public opinion. In light of the ongoing Iran–Saudi confrontation, this promises the continued negative trend in the settlement of the Palestinian problem.

A catastrophic scenario for the Fertile Crescent countries includes new conflicts and increased civil unrest across the region. Years of political violence, a high level of militarization, the rise of the lost generation caught up in wars and conflicts, as well as considerable jihadist forces, which maintain significant resources despite having gone underground, make the situation particularly dangerous.

Deterioration in the Fertile Crescent countries could, in turn, catalyse negative developments in the Gulf subregion. This negative trend will have the most impact on Saudi Arabia, where complicated and potentially very difficult reforms are underway. In addition to the foreign policy threats created by the Iran–Saudi confrontation, violent conflicts in neighbouring countries, and terrorist activities, the kingdom could also face a number of social and internal political challenges.

Some of them are connected with the change of elite generations and a possible aggravation of their rivalry. The big role played by the political

MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES



Source: Global Firepower Index (GFI), 2019

leadership and the fact that reforms depend almost entirely on Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman are increasing the country's vulnerability.

Another set of risks is associated with possible growth of social tensions due to the rapid implementation of reforms. Even though the Saudi leaders rely on the broad social basis of the forward-thinking urban population to implement the reforms, resistance is highly likely from at least three other groups of population. One is the conservative part of society, including the traditional elites, which see the reforms as a threat to their interests and traditional way of life. Another group is comprised of the marginalized suburban population that tends to support radical conservatism. And lastly, there is the liberal part of society, which believes that the reforms are insufficiently radical.

Lastly, a third group of challenges is in a way traditional for Saudi society. These challenges can lead to an ideological and religious fragmentation in the region. The country is implementing a vital project of national consolidation and acceleration of the drawn-out process of creating a united civil nation, a path that the other Gulf countries have entered as well (e.g. the crisis in Qatar is encouraging a similar transformation of Qatari society). However, this project has come across resistance from the traditional pan-regional, tribal, and religious solidarity groups, which the kingdom's external enemies could exploit if the regional conflict escalates.

This does not mean that a negative scenario is unavoidable in Saudi Arabia and, subsequently, in several other countries that depend on it. Ultimately, not a single systemic player is interested in negative developments. Also, the traditional mediation mechanisms and solutions to social contradictions available in the kingdom, as well as its major financial resources, have so far been used effectively.

However, a negative turn in the Arabian Peninsula, even if unlikely, would have a destabilizing effect on the entire region, primarily on Egypt, because of its close economic, humanitarian, and military-political ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. A suspension or substantial reduction of financial assistance from the Gulf countries and the return of millions of migrant workers to Egypt would destabilize the country politically and aggravate the so far latent confrontation. A political weakening of Egypt would undermine its weakened positions when it comes to the distribution of the Nile's water supply. The obviously catastrophic nature of this scenario is strengthening Saudi-Egyptian cooperation and their governments' interest in mutual support aimed at preventing negative scenarios.

One more negative scenario for the Mashriq countries is based on the potential destabilization of Iran. Theoretically, it can be provoked by increased sanctions pressure, the striving of external players to destabilize Iran, growing struggle between the elites, and the encouragement of revenge-seeking aspirations in Iranian society. At the same time, Iran's complicated political system, the experience of dealing with mass protests, and the so far effective mobilizing ideology, which is regularly reinforced by foreign acts of anti-Iranian aggression, constitute major stabilizing mechanisms.

The situation in Iran will also influence its allies in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, as well as in the Gulf. However, it would be wrong to believe that a serious weakening of Iran would immediately improve the situation in these countries. The weakening of Iran would only provide additional incentives for the pro-Iranian military and political organizations' struggle for their own interests, as well as for the radical forces in Tehran that can take such additional incentives as a means of pressuring their foreign policy opponents. Taken together, this could increase the probability of negative scenarios in the Fertile Crescent countries.

Positive Scenarios: Interdependence

The list of positive scenarios is much shorter. Their likelihood depends on the maintenance of stability in Iran and Saudi Arabia, which should continue their reform policies. The need to focus on national development amid growing threats due to regional confrontation and declining trust for the United States, which has become less predictable and less reliable in recent years, could provide the necessary impetus for detente which started evolving in late 2019.

The next stage of the normalization process could be the development of a collective security system in the Gulf and, on a broader scale, in the whole of West Asia. It could be based on inclusive mechanisms comprising the Gulf countries (GCC states plus Iran and Iraq), on Iran–Saudi agreements, or on a system of bilateral relations between the Gulf countries. It could cover the entire range or part of regional security matters. It could provide for using the existing GCC mechanisms or for creating new ones. No matter which approach and format is chosen, such a system would help gradually lower tensions in the region.

A de-escalation of Iran–Saudi tensions would allow the two governments to more energetically look for compromise solutions to a number of regional problems, including conflicts in Syria and Yemen and the developments in Iraq

and Lebanon, which, if complemented with favourable conditions in these countries, would help normalize the situation throughout the region.

However, not all countries in the region would benefit from this scenario. The implementation of this scenario would push the Palestinian problem to the top of the international agenda, so that Israel would have to pro-act by strengthening its positions. This may eventually lead to a new escalation of the Middle East conflict.

Moreover, the normalization of Iran–Saudi relations could become a challenge for Turkey, which would take a political and ideological stand against these two powers and increase assistance to its regional allies, including Qatar, the normalization of Saudi relations with which would not be a direct result of reconciliation with Iran, as well as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Taken together with the numerous political, social, and economic problems in Egypt, as well as Riyadh’s weakening interest in Egypt’s military and political assistance amid diminishing foreign policy tensions, this can increase social and political turbulence in Egypt.

Lastly, Iran–Saudi rapprochement could become a challenge for the UAE, which would lose its standing as Riyadh’s regional ally and would want to strengthen its positions, primarily by rallying the support of friendly forces in Yemen.

The Maghreb: Three Paths

In the foreseeable future, the situation in the Maghreb will only indirectly depend on the developments in the eastern part of MENA. In all likelihood, the key factors in its development will be Libya and particularly Algeria. Developments in both countries will in one way or another have an impact on the entire subregion. But European countries’ and the EU approaches will be of an incomparably greater importance for the Maghreb.

Based on the above, we can outline three main scenarios.

The first scenario implies that the status quo is maintained. This means, in particular, that the Algerian leaders will manage to finalize the political transition by achieving a new balance of forces between different interest groups among the political elite, take effective steps to fight corruption, reduce the army’s obvious involvement in governance, and launch the long overdue

economic reforms. The latter, however, may well lead to greater social tensions and new hardships, which could threaten the polity.

Algeria's positive dynamics may become a factor in normalizing Algerian-Moroccan relations and removing the Western Sahara problem from the agenda (though without its final settlement), something that may have a remote consequence in the shape of greater motivation for intra-Maghreb integration.

This scenario also implies preserving the current configuration of the Libyan conflict, which, despite its highly dramatic nature, is having a very limited impact on the regional situation. To prevent this impact from becoming stronger, Libya must be guaranteed against both an inflow of numerous jihadist terror groups from other conflict zones and the strengthening of the external factor.

The second scenario allows for mass protests in Algeria becoming radicalized against the background of the political elites being unable to compromise either with the protesters or among themselves. This may energize jihadist movements, including those involving veterans of both Syrian and Libyan conflicts, who will see this as their historical opportunity for revenge. But increased political violence will be powered not only by Islamism but also Berber ethnic nationalism, primarily in the Kabylie mountainous region.

These developments may put Tunisia, a country sandwiched between two conflict areas, in a highly vulnerable position, given its military weakness and an economic crisis plaguing it for quite a long time. Besides, it is a homeland of several thousand jihadists fighting in conflicts all over the world.

Finally, the third (and the most positive) scenario implies not only a successful political transition in Algeria but also a settlement of the Libyan conflict, which will promote both a broader subregional integration and a trend for the Maghreb's limited Europeanization.

Today, the latter two scenarios seem less feasible than the first one. None of the Libyan conflict settlement projects has been implemented even in part. Settlement is being made unlikely by the country's huge stockpiles of weapons and extensive financial resources, coupled with the external players' unpreparedness to invest considerable military and political clout into the settlement process. Achieving settlement via a unilateral military victory amid an extreme weakness of the state institutions gives no hope for subsequent compromises or establishment of an inclusive political system.

The Regional Level: Fragmentation, Disintegration, Integration

If we take our analysis from the subregional to regional level and look at the MENA region as a certain whole, we will see that the numerous development scenarios related to its different component parts could be divided into three large groups: fragmentation scenarios, disintegration scenarios, and integration scenarios.

The fragmentation scenarios imply the loss of any regional unity and a transformation of the Middle East into a chaotic mosaic of loose elements, where isolated points of growth will exist side by side with broad zones of armed conflicts and disintegration of statehood, while hybrid forms of authoritarianism without ideology and non-institutionalized democracy will be almost undistinguishable from each other. The huge landmass from the Atlantic to Iran will become a vast 'Zone' from the Strugatsky brothers' Roadside Picnic, where daredevil stalkers will withdraw in search of wild luck. The global powers will try to establish security buffers between themselves and the 'Zone', while regarding the latter as a territory where they can have it out among themselves, achieve their ambition, or confirm their status.

To engineer this about-face in the region, an actual disaster for the entire humankind, the main players should primarily give up whatever foreign policy pragmatism they have left.

The last few years have demonstrated a high level of recklessness practiced by both regional and some global actors. But this recklessness seems to be generated by fundamentally different circumstances. The regional players, who have always been dependent on the world hegemony, may be reckless because of inadequate awareness of the limits of their own capabilities and possible risks. They are also involved in the vicious circle of the security dilemma. But things are different as far as the global actors are concerned. Although the Middle East plays an important role in world politics, none of them sees it as a space of its vital interests. Starting in 2003, the West, and particularly the United States, have

demonstrated their readiness to take highly irresponsible steps on several occasions. The latest case in point is the murder of Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Committee (Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi), as well as their escorts.

Generally, it is the inconsistency and unpredictability of Washington's moves, the hallmark of its political behaviour in recent time, which may trigger the consummation of the fragmentation scenario.

Exacerbation of the existing conflicts or emergence of new conflict clusters may become yet another trigger. Government's inability to meet people's demands in a fitting and timely manner is an important, yet not the only, source of conflict. Some other likely sources are social overstress caused by accelerated reforms, the activities by outside forces, primarily anti-system players who have amassed in recent years an immense financial and human potential (e.g. al-Qaeda and ISIS, both outlawed in Russia), the impact of conflicts in neighbouring states, and the objective impossibility of solving vital problems within a brief timeframe. The inefficiency of international efforts to settle conflicts is another rather worrisome fact.

The disintegration scenarios imply multidirectional development in different subregions of West Asia and North Africa, with normalization in some of these having no effect on development trends in others, or even affecting them adversely. The latter is possible, if, on the one hand, subregional contradictions continue to be carried over to neighbouring spaces (Iran–Saudi Arabia to Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, Saudi Arabia/UAE–Turkey/Qatar to Libya, etc.), and, on the other, if destabilizing social elements are ousted to armed conflict zones. The spillover of these practices in recent years is an important factor in the Middle East's creeping disintegration.

Another likely source of disintegration is the desire to cut oneself off from negative political processes and intensify their cooperation with different regional spaces. To some extent, examples of this approach are provided by certain Maghreb states, such as Tunisia, which seeks to minimize border contacts with Libya, or Morocco, which has closed off its border with Algeria. At the same time, the two states are hoping to actively develop relations with their northern partners.

In absolute terms, this scenario implies disintegration of the Middle East and North Africa into several disconnected spaces, with each of them either forming a separate political region, or joining some other space and giving shape to a new regional, e.g. Mediterranean, unity.

Finally, the third option is integration, which is likely to emerge if some positive changes occur in every part of the MENA region. It implies its preservation as a political region whose unity is based on a new architecture and revamped international institutions. In order for this scenario to realize, it would be important to find compromises between the three existing alliances – Saudi Arabia/UAE/Egypt, Turkey/Qatar, and Iran – inducing other big states (Algeria, Iraq) to join the reintegration process, and facilitating positive change in the destabilized countries.

It is obvious that none of the above scenarios can be implemented in their pure form, but their description makes it possible to outline the main vectors of the region's future development.

Russia and Future of the Middle East

Upon emerging as a key external player, Russia has faced a number of threats, challenges and risks, including hybrid ones, which directly affect its national security, as well as economic and political interests. To respond to them, it had to raise the level of its presence in the region, and in the recent decade Russian role in this part of the world has grown considerably.

While Moscow is strongly averse to any outside interference in internal affairs of states and is against the incitement of or support for 'colour revolutions' or 'regime-change' strategies, it is rapidly developing cooperation with most Middle Eastern states, including those that are in conflict with each other, cooperation that in certain cases acquires the nature of a strategic partnership and predetermines its influence on the process that shapes their future. Today, whatever scenarios for the region's development come to life as a result of complex transformations, Russian involvement in the Middle Eastern affairs is undoubted.

Constructive equidistance, honest brokerage, rejection of reckless attempts by external and certain regional players to thoughtlessly substitute chaos for the existing order, and strong counteraction to terrorism and extremism are policies that increase the chances for positive scenarios.

No one in the region is guaranteed against the emergence of new black swans, something that may overturn even the most cautious forecasts. With predictability and consistency in its policies, Russia aims to promote these principles in the whole Middle East future development.