



The Middle East in Search for Lost Awakening

Vitaly Naumkin,
Vasily Kuznetsov

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

ISBN 978-5-907318-30-4



© The Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club, 2021

42 Bolshaya Tatarskaya st., Moscow, 115184, Russia

About the Authors

Vitaly Naumkin

Doctor of Science (History), Professor, Full Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), President of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Chair at the Department of Regional Problems of the Faculty of World Politics, Moscow State University

Vasily Kuznetsov

PhD in History, Head of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies; Head of the Department of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Oriental Faculty of the State Academic University for the Humanities

Contents

- 3 Introduction
- 4 Three Periods of Renaissance
- 8 Renaissance of Societies
- 13 Renaissance of Ideologies
and Development Projects
- 18 Renaissance of Leadership
and the Institutional Problem
- 21 Renaissance of the Region

Introduction

The year 2020 was probably the strangest year of the 21st century so far. It also concluded one of its most eventful decades. For the Middle East, it began with the Arab Spring, which was the culmination of a long period of worsening political crises and increasing social tensions.

The Arab Spring, which promised to open the way to positive change in the region, turned out to be a major disappointment. People's hopes were dashed on the harsh reality of great-power interventions, violent regime change, occupation and the plunder of national wealth; rampaging terrorist groups that exploit religion; civil wars and conflicts, migration, human suffering and sanctions. The region plunged into a seemingly endless period of crises.

The decade ended with the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened humanitarian conditions, hobbled economic growth and strained social ties in the region. The hope that it would trigger a fundamental transformation of societies, states and the entire system of international relations, with greater emphasis on sovereignty, independence, cooperation and mutual assistance, has not materialised. Still, the pandemic did reinforce some existing trends, which, taken together, can be described as promising a *new renaissance**

The Middle East, which for a long time was looked upon exclusively as the object of foreign influence and a periphery of the world order, has turned overnight into a source of new trends in global development – not just a laboratory of global politics but a trendsetter. Protest movements rallying in the name of justice, a new role for religion in politics, heightened international competition, greater influence for regional powers often capable of outsmarting global players, and the securitisation of international relations are defining features of the modern world that evolved in the Middle East before spreading beyond its borders.

* “The Renaissance” or “the Awakening”.

From a theoretical perspective, this conclusion calls for revising the scheme of global politics as a system of central and peripheral regions (West vs East and North vs South), which adequately described reality in centuries past.

There are no longer any central or peripheral regions, nor is it even possible to divide the world geographically in a binary way.

In practical terms, this means that the West has lost its ability to determine the path of human development or put forward “universal” ideals for the future. It also means that the long period of technological civilisation is over. Technological success has ceased to be a guarantee of leadership, but it is unclear what will replace it.

On the other hand, rather than interpreting this Middle East renaissance from a global perspective, it can be understood as an element of the region’s internal development rooted in a growing concern over issues of identity and a desire to rethink historical inheritance in Middle Eastern societies.

Three Periods of Renaissance

The idea of renaissance, as defined in this paper, can be regarded as a central metaphor in Islamic culture.

Prophet Muhammad offered a new concept of equality for humanity in one of his sermons delivered in Arabia in the 7th century. Fully comprehended only several centuries later, it dealt with the periodic recurrence of prophetic missions, which encouraged people to revive the idea of divine righteousness and attempt to restore justice. But every time they strayed from the righteous path, groping in the dark until a new messenger appeared. Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad was the last messenger.

The subsequent political development of the Arab/Muslim world saw an endless number of religious political movements that called for revival, the renunciation of ungodly novelties and a return to the path of the righteous forefathers. Examples include the Almoravid dynasty and the Almohad Caliphate in the Maghreb, the Wahhabis on the Arabian Peninsula, the Senussi in Libya, the Mahdist Sudanese, and many others.

In the middle of the 19th century, the idea of renaissance was given a new lease on life in the Arab provinces (vilayets) of the Ottoman Empire. The Ennahda (renaissance) movement and similar processes in other Middle Eastern societies were kindled by a desire to find more effective ways to overcome backwardness and national humiliation and usher in a period of reform and modernisation, as well as to better understand and support their intrinsic cultural and civilisational identity.

Arab intellectuals interested in modernisation turned their attention to European achievements – from technological to philosophical and political – including the concepts of nation, representative power and democracy. Their encounters with European thinking led them to take a fresh look at national identity and statehood.

The evolving concepts of Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism, as well as the pressing concern over how to balance tradition with modernisation, Islam with the modern state, and the boundaries of democracy and social justice, shaped the agenda of social and political debate for the next 150 years and laid out the greatest development challenges facing the region.

The second Arab renaissance was connected with the struggle for independence and the creation of new independent Arab states in the middle of the 20th century. The first Ennahda (renaissance) movement was focused on culture and education and sought to promote the agency

of Arab societies in the Ottoman Empire. The second renaissance took place primarily in the political sphere. It developed during the age of colonialism and took the form of the inspired efforts of national liberation leaders to achieve national sovereignty. The concepts of identity, the nature of statehood, democracy and state institutions were becoming more pragmatic and action-oriented. This led to the trichotomy of Islamism, secular nationalism and Marxism as the framework for the development of an overwhelming majority of state ideologies in the Arab world. Meanwhile, Western liberalism, while remaining on the Arab agenda, occupied a marginal position and was never fully accepted by Arab political elites.

The idea of Ennahda is connected with the Arabic political tradition, which sought to find its own way that differed from both the West and the East. But similar chapters can be found in the history of the Turkish, Iranian and Jewish nations. The Tanzimat reforms, Ottomanism and pan-Turkism, the Young Turk Revolution and the evolution of the modern Turkish state; the Iranian revolution of 1905-1911 and the reforms of the Pahlavis; plus the Zionist movement and the establishment of the state of Israel were the manifestations of the painful search for identity in a new modernised world.

The outlines of a third Ennahda became visible in the 2010s. Unlike the first two renaissance periods, it is developing not as a response to the challenges of colonialism, but primarily as the result of the stagnation of the development path taken during the national liberation period. This is why the new renaissance is directed not so much against external enemies, such as other states or the West, as against internal enemies.

Therefore, the post-colonial interpretation of the dramatic developments of the 2010s and the region's transformation, which enjoyed little attention before, appears to be increasingly relevant.

Indeed, the 2011 and 2019 mass protests were not directed against external actors, but against flaws in the political regimes at home, which were criticised as unfair, corrupt and even alien to society, and hence neocolonialist. These protests were fuelled by the rejection of foreign interference and the brazen encroachments on national sovereignty by great powers.

Middle Eastern societies acquired a new sense of agency, reconceived their identities and created new images of their social and political future during the revival period and the subsequent period of social and political reform, which was almost painless in some countries and resulted in civil war and catastrophic confrontation in others.

These images can be described by two Arabic words – *islah* and *tajdid* – which cannot be easily distinguished from each other in translation. Both words mean reform, but *islah* means qualitative improvement and the overcoming of divides, disharmony and disunity, while *tajdid* is interpreted as restoring something to its original condition.² These concepts capture the two different logics operating in the modern period of renaissance in the Middle East, which are revealed in the changing self-perception of societies, states and the region as a whole.

The post-colonial renaissance in the Middle East largely forestalled the dramatic developments that took place beyond the region in 2020. The recent protests in the United States and Europe are about more than just questions of identity; they are also evidence of dangerously high level of mistrust in national elites, which are seen as an alien and often hostile force preventing societies from making progress on their own paths of development.

² Muhamad Zaid Ismail, Norahida binti Mohamed, Nashaat Baioumy *Islah and Tajdid: The Approach to Rebuilding Islamic Civilizations*. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325123832_Islah_and_Tajdid_The_Approach_to_Rebuilding_Islamic_Civilizations

Renaissance of Societies

Each of the three renaissance periods in the 19th and 21st centuries was primarily a renewal of society. While confronting challenges and fighting colonialism and neocolonialism, regardless of who was the perpetrator, societies were compelled to declare themselves agents of the historical process and thereby acquire a new quality.

The process of acquiring agency can be described with the aid of the historical and political theory developed by medieval Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), whose ideas have long generated only limited interest among Middle East historians and experts, but in recent years have acquired newfound resonance (in particular, the Russian Islamic scholar Igor Alekseev refers to them).

In his fundamental work, *Al-Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun proposed an original theory of statehood evolution based on the idea of constant confrontation between two communities – the peasant-nomadic (*al-umran al-badawi*) and the urban (*al-umran al-hadari*) people. The peasant-nomadic community, although less economically developed than its urban counterpart, is much more consolidated and therefore can resist the other group's pressure. The “rural” community prevails over the “city” from time to time, invariably bringing about the same cycle – the formation of a new statehood accompanied by higher living standards, followed by the disintegration of social ties, fragmentation and weakening.

In the modern context, there is nothing like a direct confrontation between rural and urban communities. The urbanization processes that have been rapidly unfolding in the Middle East over the past decades, marked by the erosion of tribal and clan ties, has moved the conflict described by the medieval

historian to cities, the melting pots of modernised populations (the 'new city,' or *neo-hadara*), that are fully integrated into the modern economy and political system, on the one hand, and the less adapted groups who find themselves left out of modernisation and political development (the new rural people, or *neo-badawiya*), on the other. The model of political governance that took shape in Arab countries in the mid-20th century was actually based on the alienation of these groups from each other.

The confrontation between these two parts of society can play out violently or relatively peacefully. Furthermore, the new social agency reviving through that process can be realised either through *islah* or through *tajdid*.

If the *neo-hadara* take the path of *islah*, they seek to address the existing vices of the sociopolitical system primarily through modernising it, which generates a globalisation-based narrative highlighting sociopolitical issues that had previously remained relatively marginal – the fight against corruption and nepotism, the rights of subaltern groups, gender equality, and so on.

If this part of society sees its future in *tajdid*, its activity forms a conservative narrative, in which the main threat to the natural order of things comes from negative external influences, while the ideal is the restoration of the good old order from the 20th century.

At the same time, in cases where the *neo-badawiya* embrace *tajdid*, the result is a fundamentalist concept of going back to the time of our righteous ancestors and building a fundamentally new society and state, based on the ideals of the golden age.

When the *neo-badawiya* take the path of *islah*, they have to reject the existing political reality – more or less acceptable for

the *neo-hadara* – as well as the ideals of religious fundamentalism, which leads to the need to invent a new order of things based on such values as social justice and social solidarity, most vividly reflected in the socialist narrative (table 1).

	Neo-badawiya	Neo-hadara
Islah	Left-wing narratives (1)	Liberal narratives (3)
Tajdid	Fundamentalist narratives (2)	Conservative narratives (4)

It is obvious that the four narratives have different sociopolitical implications. Those who opt for the fourth quadrant are in the most advantageous position: if the *neo-hadara* embrace *tajdid*, it is about preserving the existing sociopolitical system with minor changes only, and the prescriptions for such changes are more or less familiar by now. Accordingly, the weakest position is the first quadrant, where marginalised groups adopting socialist values need to consider taking over power and building a fundamentally new system of social relations. Supporters of the second and third options occupy the middle ground and, accordingly, are in the greatest tension with each other.

The four aforementioned approaches to societal renewal have always been out there, but as contradictions and competition intensify, each of them comes into greater conflict with opponents, which leads to a rethinking of identities, the formation of new consolidated groups and greater social fragmentation, at least in the short term.

Implementing these narratives in the sociopolitical landscape requires an institutional and ideological framework, neither of which fully coincide with the narratives themselves.

It would make sense if the *neo-hadara* acted through modern civil society institutions, while *neo-badawiya* relied on traditional social institutions. In reality though, because of the social proximity of the two narratives of the *neo-badawiya*, the two of the *neo-hadara*, as well as the similarity of values of *islah* supporters from different social groups and the adherents of *tajdid* – practically all of the narratives can be implemented through both modern and traditional institutions. The result is an increase in the number and variety of non-state actors vigorously borrowing from each other's experience.

However, it is possible to identify ideas and organisations that fit each of the narratives better than others. Conservatism, initially possessing a protective character and guarding the traditional model of state in some way, mostly favours vertical governance models tied to state power. This concept can certainly manifest itself in various political parties' activities; however, as a rule, they feel uncomfortable without constant state support. Fundamentalist groups are more inclined to use traditional or pseudo-traditional institutions. Even if they constitute themselves as political parties or NGOs, they mainly do so for tactical purposes and this formal identification does not reflect their actual socio-political goals. Liberal groups, as a rule, cannot afford to act as independent political forces, while their values lead them to reject traditional agencies and mainly act as NGOs. Finally, leftists have the greatest difficulty institutionalising – except when their discourse is not embraced by conservatives.

Many organisations are actually hybrids and embrace a wide variety of behaviours and supporters of different narratives in practice. Hezbollah is perhaps the most striking example of this, combining features of a political party, a social movement, an armed group, an NGO and a business. Its activity is a blend of fundamentalism and conservatism, with additional elements from the two remaining narratives. Its successes in recent decades have made Hezbollah's

experience attractive to other groups seeking to emulate its approach to varying degrees.

Since the renewal of society implies stronger horizontal ties, organisations based on networking have become particularly relevant in recent years. At the same time, new technical capabilities provided by information technology and the rise of mobile and internet communications facilitate such networking better when combined with communication models that were previously quite developed in the region. Suffice it to recall the Ismaili communities dating back to the 9th and 10th centuries, Sufi institutions or the Muslim Brotherhood organisation founded more than 90 years ago.

Due to greater networking, none of the narratives is unfolding within the narrow boundaries of nation states. Groups and organisations representing each of these narratives are integrated into broader regional networks, and their cooperation often involves more than exchanging ideas – they also provide very real mutual support, whether political, economic or military.

Today, the period of fierce confrontation between the *neo-badawiya* and the *neo-hadara* has most likely come to an end in most countries of the region. Attempts to implement fundamentally new statehood development projects have been largely unsuccessful, and the old elites have managed to retain their power, despite being substantially reconstituted. This applies not only to Egypt or Algeria, but even to Tunisia where the Ennahda Islamist party had to adapt to the existing political system and accept some of the republican values after becoming part of the government. This suggests the main dividing line will be between the *islah* and *tajdid* concepts, not the *neo-badawiya* and *neo-hadara*.

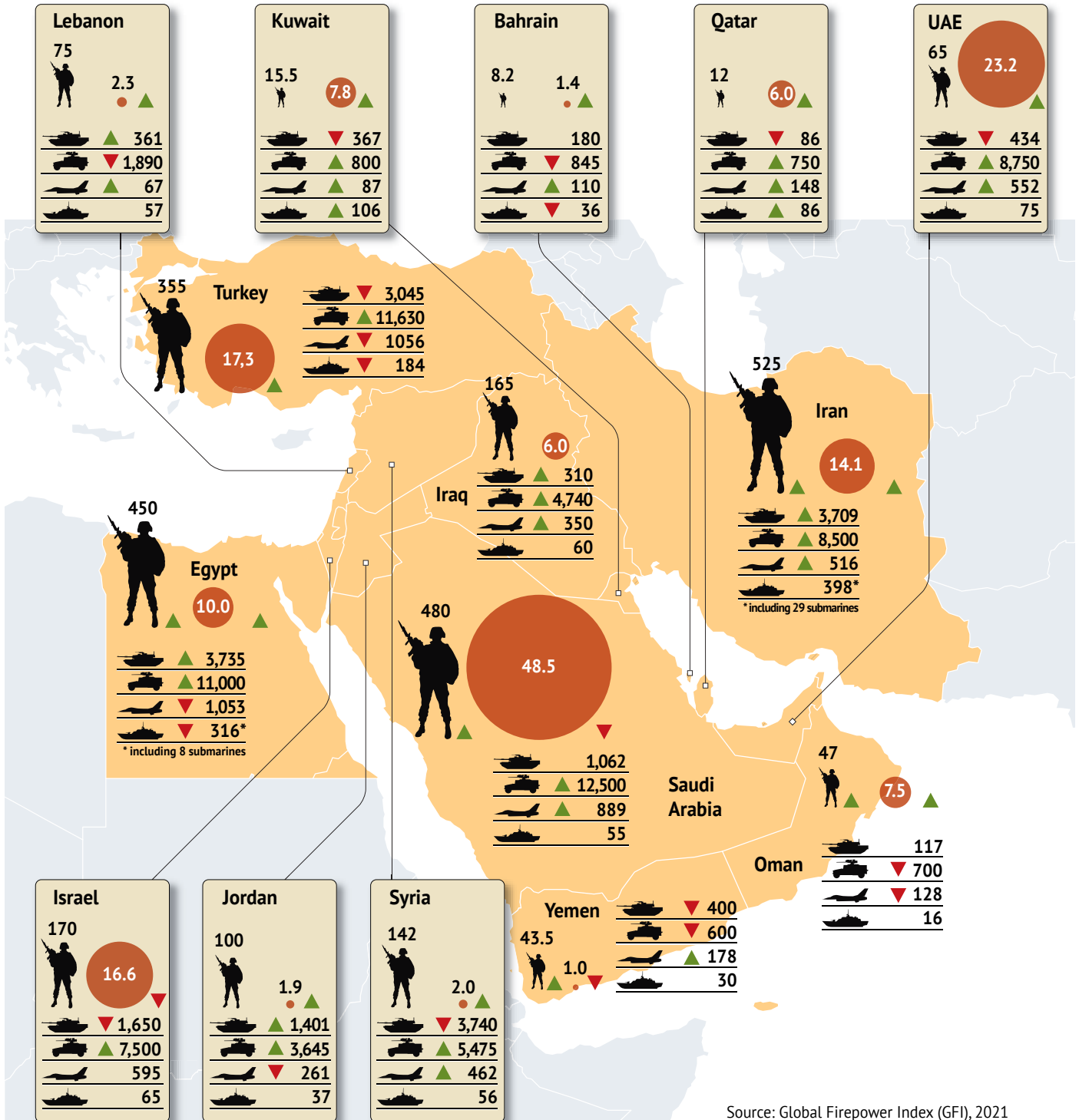
Renaissance of Ideologies and Development Projects

The preceding claim raises the question of the role that ideologies play in the region's politics. It is fairly self-evident that none of the aforementioned narratives can be directly correlated with any existing ideology. Islamist movements, Arab nationalists, left-wing parties and all others freely combine elements from all four types of narratives in their discourses.

This is partly due to the inertia of the entire spectrum of ideologies, which formed during the period of colonialism and national liberation struggles, when the political agenda and the very social order were completely different from what they are now.

At the same time, prototypes for the first two elements of the Islamism–Arab nationalism–Marxism trichotomy had manifested in the region's history long before the concept of political ideology had appeared. The mid-8th century confrontation between the Abbasids who preached Islamic egalitarianism and the Umayyads who relied on the Arab tribes may serve as a prototype for the confrontation between (pan) Islamists and secular Arab nationalists in the 20th century. Consequently, both Arab nationalism and Islamism should be viewed not as ideologies in their pure form, but rather as ideological projections of the two forms of self-identification intrinsic to the region. And, if that is the case, it is quite possible to assume that they will persist even after the end of ideologies as such – a trend that emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century and was described by Jean-François Lyotard in his famous essay, *The Postmodern Condition*.

MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES



Source: Global Firepower Index (GFI), 2021

This might also explain the fact that neither the evolution nor disappearance of ideologies actually removed that trichotomy from the historical arena.

Some time ago, the idea of the final collapse of Arab nationalism after 1967 provided common ground. Today, however, it can be argued that Arab nationalism is reviving in at least three guises. **Firstly**, it is coming back as a reality of the cultural and communication landscape supported by a common labour market. That the protest movements in 2011 and 2019 swept Arab societies was no coincidence, and their participants made active use of information technology to organise. **Secondly**, it is manifesting itself in Baathist ideology, whose adherents have managed to stay in power in Syria. Incidentally, although relatively few in number, Baathist and Nasserist parties and successors of the Arab Nationalist Movement are represented in almost all Arab countries. And, **thirdly**, it is reviving as a foreign policy project in a number of Gulf states, primarily the UAE and Saudi Arabia, mainly in opposition to Iran.

Today, the collapse of Islamism and closely aligned movements is invoked as often as the collapse of Arab nationalism before it. Indeed, the Islamist project has faced a number of challenges in the past few years, and its supporters still have to devise appropriate responses. On the one hand, it was discredited by ultra-radical members of terrorist groups that were mostly defeated on the battlefield, although that defeat was far from final. On the other hand, moderate Islamists and even Salafis were largely integrated into political systems – political parties representing them are registered in almost all Arab countries with parliamentary systems (with the exception of Syria) and in most cases, they are represented in the legislature. As a result, Islamist forces have no other choice but to rethink their agenda in the new conditions, where confronting regimes accused of authoritarianism and posing as victims is not enough, while their record of savage violence has stripped

them of support among the majority of the region's population and long since turned almost the entire international community against them.

As for the third element of the trichotomy, Marxism and related socialist ideologies, they appear still to be going through the painful process of rethinking their agenda and role in society. However, this does not seem to have limited the left's political activity. Leftist beliefs remain quite popular in Western Sahara, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Yemen and some other countries in the region.

This may also explain the weakness of left-wing movements compared with Islamist or Arab nationalist ones: unlike the latter, the former are solely based on ideology, not on ideological projections of identities. An indirect confirmation of this can be seen in the fact that none of the ideologies popular in the Western world in recent decades (subalternity, environmentalism, anti-globalism, and the like) has found broad support in the Middle East, although some of their elements may be borrowed by a wide variety of political forces. Other forms of identity, including local nationalisms or neo-imperial discourses, are gaining significant traction in the Arab world and beyond – in Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

If you look at the ideological quests in the Middle East through the lens of the previously discussed *islah-tajid* dichotomy, you can see that it does not correlate with large ideological projects, but rather with what Jean-François Lyotard described as local consensus. In political practice, the concept is primarily expressed in national development strategies.

The choice between *islah* and *tajdid* has to be made not only by civic activists, but also (to a much greater extent) by political elites who are required to respond to ever new global challenges and to the demands of their own societies alike.

Algeria, Egypt and Syria should be considered vivid examples of adherence to *tajdid*. The efforts made by their governments are aimed primarily at restoring the norm as they understand it and eliminating threats to the existing political and/or socioeconomic system. This explains their focus on achieving national security goals, which are interpreted extremely broadly, and tend to view development problems through the prism of national security as well. Although this approach may have seemed slightly archaic just recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it newly relevant in many countries.

Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are examples of *islah*. Not without difficulty and obstacles along the way, their governments are working towards a future based on the symbiosis of local cultural and historical traditions and external borrowings. The ambitious national development strategies adopted by the Gulf countries are manifestations of this approach to governance; its tangible forms include the knowledge-based economy being built in the UAE, the space programme, feminisation of the public sector, robotisation, Europeanisation of Moroccan and Tunisian legislation, and so on. Of course, in some cases these achievements are of a declarative nature and say more about development priorities than any actual profound changes, but this does not make their ideological component less important.

The choice of one of the two paths appears to be determined not only by the political system's configuration or its vulnerability, but also by the specific worldview of the respective elites. At the same time, both paths of renaissance have their strengths and weaknesses. Reform (*tajdid*) does not promise any breakthroughs in development, but should guarantee the restoration of the normal functioning of the system and its stability. The problem is that we never know how well the old governance system can adapt to changing conditions (both internal and external), and the securitisation of the development agenda can

only temporarily ensure public peace. *Islah*, on the other hand, with all its tempting prospects, will most likely be difficult to limit to selected spheres of social life or the economy, which means that over time, there will be a need for political change.

Renaissance of Leadership and the Institutional Problem

If we look at development issues not from the perspective of the regional elites' ideological quests and self-awareness, but in the context of governance practices, then perhaps the key conflict that Middle Eastern states (primarily but not only Arab states) are facing today becomes clear – the long-term development trends and the measures required to make effective decisions here and now are in tension.

The long-term trends here are actually in line with global practice. Not without difficulty, democratic institutions of governance are spreading to all countries that have representative institutions. Electoral processes have become extremely important even in countries that operate in a state of permanent crisis. Civil society institutions are being strengthened, including in countries in conflict. It would seem that all this should suggest the obvious choice of renaissance through *islah* and, accordingly, institutional changes. However, institutions have always remained a weakness of Middle Eastern political systems, and the imbalances in their development that originated during the formation of statehood have never been overcome. Initially, the most effective parts of the state machine were military and security services and the technocratic bureaucracy, while the representative and judicial authorities, as well as party

systems and civic organisations remained extremely weak. Once they become stronger through social modernisation, it will become necessary to change, if not the political configuration, then at least governance practices, which naturally renders those practices temporarily inadequate and increases security threats.

The heightened risks from social transformation and external influence create a *state of exception* (according to Carl Schmitt), in which systems that can immediately rally and respond to new challenges and threats are the most effective. This naturally increases the salience of the personality factor in governance and temporarily reduces the importance of institutions. Of course, further on, this can become a source of renewed authoritarianism. Indeed, Schmitt developed his state of exception and sovereignty concepts to legitimise dictatorship. However, along with the consolidation of public institutions, the prospect of accelerated modernisation from the top with a possible new escalation of conflict in the medium term seems to be more likely (the conflict can also be overcome non-violently).

However, no matter how developments unfold in the future, today we can assert that one of the forms of the new Ennahda is the revival of political leadership, which acquired new features that are fundamentally different from those of the first two renaissance periods.

Politicians were not the key figures in the first Ennahda at all; it was ideologists, intellectuals and educators at the helm, who saw their role mainly as transforming culture and identity and only surreptitiously tried to influence the political process. Suffice it to mention such leaders of *islah* as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his disciple Muhammad Abduh or (outside the Arab world) Theodor Herzl. Only at the end of that period did leaders of national liberation movements begin to come to the fore.

The second Ennahda was led by politicians who proposed their own visions of the future: Hassan II, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Habib Bourguiba, Muammar Gaddafi, King Faisal and others. Their reformist activities were not so much driven by the need to respond to contemporary challenges, but by an interest in implementing their own development projects. They were later replaced by functionaries who sought to maintain the more or less effective work of the system already in place. The next change of generation was not directly related to the Arab Spring events. Mohammed bin Zayed, Mohammed bin Salman, Tamim bin Hamad, Mohammed VI, Benjamin Netanyahu, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Bashar al-Assad and even Abdel Fattah el-Sisi were not elevated to the vanguard of history by protests – many of them had been in power long before they began. However, some of those leaders were able to express themselves in new ways in time of protest, regional conflict and growing terrorist threats.

These leaders do not show the same interest in philosophical quests as the leaders of the first Ennahda; neither do they share the romanticism of the second, or the dull technocratism of the turn of the century generation. This constellation, brought to the fore by extraordinary circumstances that happened in a tormented region of a crumbling world, is emerging as a generation of tacticians. Their distinctive qualities are an ability to rapidly respond to new challenges, flexible views, and bold decision-making. That is why they are often difficult to deal with – their pragmatism eclipses all else, while any political strategy, if there is one, mostly emerges post factum. They do not seem to believe in ideology, but are prepared to use it to achieve coherent goals.

All this entails both pros and cons. Beyond an ability to quickly make difficult decisions and the political will to implement them, these leaders are capable of radically restructuring political systems for the future and overcoming institutional imbalances.

On the downside, the entire decision-making process is directed, if not by one figure, then by a narrow circle of people; horizontal governance models are dismissed, and emotion becomes an outside factor in both domestic and foreign policy. In addition, the growing complexity of government systems raises the cost of error that can result from one-man decision-making, which, in turn, threatens to erode public trust.

The problems of development, institutional transformation and political leadership compel us to admit that the process of transformation in the Middle East is far from complete, and its recent deceleration is just an illusion.

Renaissance of the Region

The first and second periods of renaissance were connected not only with the changing societies and states of the Middle East, but also with the region's changing place in the system of international relations. During the first renaissance, the region was drawn into global politics through colonial governance. The second renaissance period saw the integration of young states into the bipolar system of relations, when the Middle East emerged as a political region within its current boundaries and created mechanisms of relations with the West and an internal architecture.

The third renaissance obviously involves a revision of relations with the world and a change in the region's configuration, and the parameters of both processes can differ.

One of the aspects of this transformation was pointed out nearly a decade ago by Mustapha Tlili, a prominent writer and diplomat who took part in many of the Valdai Club's Middle East conferences. He

noted at one of them in the early 2010s that the Arab Spring presented the MENA states with two paths. One was rapid modernisation, integration into the community of the world's leading economies, stronger democracy and civil rights and freedoms. The other was a return to the archaic past, chaos and violence. Paradoxically, ten years later we can say that both scenarios have materialised. A distance of less than 1,500 kilometres separates Iraq and Syria, which were taken over by ISIS/Daesh (a terrorist organisation banned in Russia), from the UAE, which recently launched the Al Amal (Hope) probe to Mars, with female scientists and engineers making up 80 percent of the team. These 1,500 km are the distance between an archaic past and a high-tech future, between two fundamentally different types of economy, society, political system and views of renaissance. Although ISIS as a territorial entity has been destroyed, it still has numerous cells and an army of supporters with the potential to bring back the archaic past. As such, there still remain two potential scenarios for restructuring the region.

The normalisation of relations between several Arab states and Israel in late 2020, although largely based on opposition to Iran, will inevitably lead to strategic changes. Still, the lingering Palestinian problem, as well as the gap between the status quo and elementary ideals of justice, is preventing lasting peace in the region. However, the agreements normalising relations with Israel, which hold the promise of economic and technological connectivity, has clearly demonstrated the signatory countries' choice of development path.

But two obstacles threaten to hinder progress.

First, technological modernisation and the desire to remain at the forefront of the current industrial and technological revolution must be supported by a fundamental socio-political transformation as

a compensatory means of overcoming marginalisation. It is unclear if this goal can be achieved through strong political leadership, wealth and cooperation with the world's technological leaders on the basis of complementarity.

Second, a clear choice of one option and consistent rejection of the other implies a split from some regional countries, enhancing external risks. Most people prefer to forget that before the Second Intifada some regional countries, besides Egypt and Jordan who maintained full-scale diplomatic relations with Israel, made a go at developing trade and even diplomatic ties with Israel to some degree, but the side effects were not worth the political risks these countries faced.

Another pathway of change involves relations between Arab and non-Arab countries. The process of national revival has swept Turkey, Iran and Israel no less than their Arab neighbours.

Of course, the so-called Turkish and Iranian models that were discussed in 2011 turned out to be inapplicable in Arab countries, though both Turkey and Iran have provided attractive examples of socio-political development for large groups of the population in the Arab world and beyond.

Although the Israeli model cannot be regarded as an example, for objective reasons, and therefore its leadership potential is greatly limited, the country has recently become better integrated into the Middle Eastern system of relations, as proved by the abovementioned normalisation of ties with several Arab countries.

As for Turkey, its dramatic resurgence and growing political ambitions can be seen as a kind of mega-trend of regional development. Analysts used to think that Turkey could only be a spoiler in the region and

was unable to create the foundations of its own system of governance. We can see now that it is trying to overcome this limitation. Ankara is aspiring to become a regional power and create a system that would extend beyond the Middle East. As a result, the borders in the Middle East are changing and Turkey's conflict-based logic is spreading to the East Mediterranean and the South Caucasus. But it would be premature to say whether this process can become deeply rooted or will remain a projection of Middle Eastern battles.

Either way, it is clear that Turkey's adoption of a new role cannot be explained by political pragmatism alone, which cannot account for changes in foreign policy identity, but rather demonstrates that the Turkish elite is rethinking the country's role in global politics.

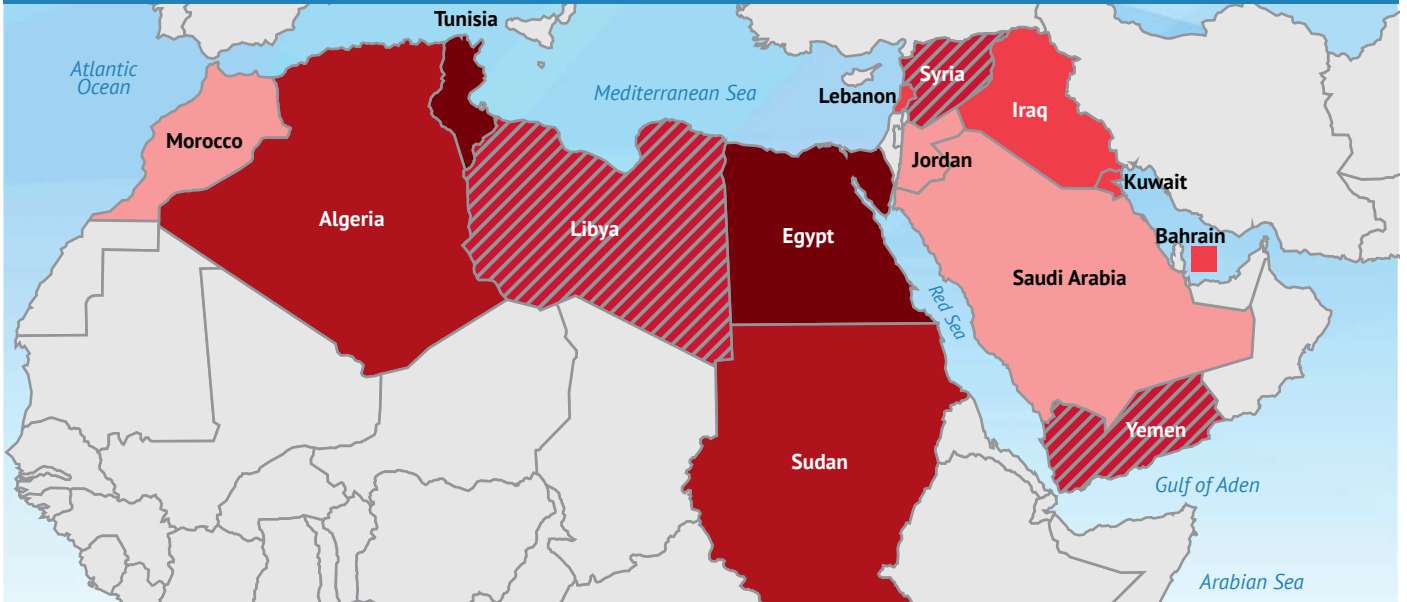
Iran is in a similar situation. The years-long process of its integration into the Middle Eastern system of relations has greater chances of success with the Biden administration in power in the United States. But there is no obvious solution to the main obstacle – Iran's differences with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Trita Parsi, the founder of the National Iranian American Council, believes that if Riyadh had to choose, it would have preferred an isolated Iran with a nuclear bomb to a non-nuclear Iran that is an accepted member of the international community. In other words, Iran without international sanctions is more dangerous for Saudi Arabia than Iran with the deadly bomb. James Dorsey from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University argues that Iran is a threat to Saudi Arabia's ambitions regardless of the kind of regime in power. Since both are Islamic states, the only plausible conclusion is that this is not a religious rivalry but a confrontation of two nationalisms that weaponise their religious identities.

The revival of Arab states is mostly internally directed and involves a revision of national identities and development paths,

ARAB SPRING: 10 YEARS ON

The developments that erupted in 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa profoundly changed the political landscape of the region and led to civil wars, the overthrow of governments, and revolutions

What the Arab Spring has led to



- Countries where revolutions occurred
- Countries with massive protests and political crises
- Countries where armed conflicts occurred
- Countries where a political regime change took place
- Countries where reforms have taken place

Factors that gave rise to the Arab Spring



Demographic imbalances



Lack of social mobility



Striving to change elites



Corruption and nepotism



Unemployment



Natural disasters

Aftermath of the Arab Spring



- ↑ Growth of armed conflicts
- ↑ The rise of religious extremism.
- ↑ The emergence of the terrorist group ISIS (banned in the Russian Federation)
- ↑ Increased narcotics and weapons trafficking
- ↑ Rise in the number of refugees (from 2 million in 2010 to 18.6 million in 2019). Millions of people were expelled from their homes and sought refuge in Europe and elsewhere



- ↑ Change in external factors
- ↑ Change of the balance of power in the region
- ↑ Expanding Democracy
- ↑ Strengthening civil society



- ↑ Free movement of militants between various states of the Middle East, North Africa and neighbouring countries
- ↑ Numerous "grey territories" beyond the control of the central authorities



- ↑ Increasing social polarisation and the growing importance of socio-economic demands

Sources: news agencies, www.washingtonpost.com, gazeta.ru

whereas the revival of non-Arabic actors depends to a larger degree on foreign policy and evolving views of the role that these states play in the region and the world. This external orientation can only partly be explained by a desire to make up for the difficulties of internal development. A fuller explanation is that these states are drawing on their own imperial experience in the process of national revival and seeking to position themselves accordingly on the global political stage.

One more area of change in the Middle Eastern subsystem concerns conflicts. Although none have been settled yet, recent developments show that they no longer dominate the regional agenda and have largely lost their strategic significance.

Of course, the absence of a political settlement remains a problem in each particular case, as international mediation has come up short. However, it is obvious that the level of confrontation between external actors has diminished both at the regional and global levels. The chances for a settlement will likely increase, unless confrontation gains renewed momentum, for example, due to a shift in the balance of relations between the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, they can be undermined internally, for example, if the terrorist groups and organisations whose financing depends on conflicts resume operations. In this context, it is especially important to expand the settlement agenda to include armed militias and demilitarisation of the population. Unfortunately, these issues mostly remain on the fringes of discussions on peacebuilding.

The divide in regional development described by Mustapha Tlili will persist unless the countries in the throes of conflict restore peace and reintegrate into the Middle Eastern and global system of

relations. Successful states can shield themselves from the negative influence of their neighbours, but there will continue to be an indirect influence. This influence includes the threat that violence and terrorism will proliferate, though the mere existence of these threats will limit the prospects of strengthening and restoring the balance of state institutions, as well as developing regional cooperation, let alone integration.

This transformation of regional relations is largely connected with changes in Middle Eastern countries' relations with external actors. The region will retain a major place in the system of international relations due to its location, population size, resources and symbolic significance, but the role of external actors in the ongoing processes in regional countries is gradually decreasing – a trend that will likely continue in the post-COVID world.

European countries have minimised their role in the Middle East, while the United States has maintained the policy course set by Barack Obama. But taking a step back from the region does not mean leaving altogether. More likely, the US will make increased use of indirect engagement strategies and will continue trying to create a regional system of relations in which it does not regulate affairs directly.

Russia's role in the region will likely change as well. Although it has objectively increased during the past five years, Moscow never planned to replace the United States or Europe in the management of regional processes. After all, their experience was not very positive, and external management does not seem to have good chances given the increasingly complicated situation in the region.

Past positive interactions, the aspiration of Middle Eastern countries to diversify their non-regional ties and certain similarities

between their socio-political processes perhaps hold the promise of greater cooperation with Russia. There are also obvious risks, because neither side has clearly articulated its foreign policy strategies. But risks can be neutralised by Russia's commitment to international law, respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of regional countries, emphasis on equal and mutually beneficial cooperation, conflict mediation experience, appealing foreign policy initiatives such as the Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf, as well as its historically friendly ties with Middle Eastern countries. All this will be reinforced by Middle Eastern countries' increasing interest in developing ties with Russia.

 ValdaiClub

 ValdaiClub

 ValdaiClub

valdai@valdaiclub.com



Council on Foreign and Defense Policy



RIAC
Russian International
Affairs Council



MGIMO
UNIVERSITY



NATIONAL RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY