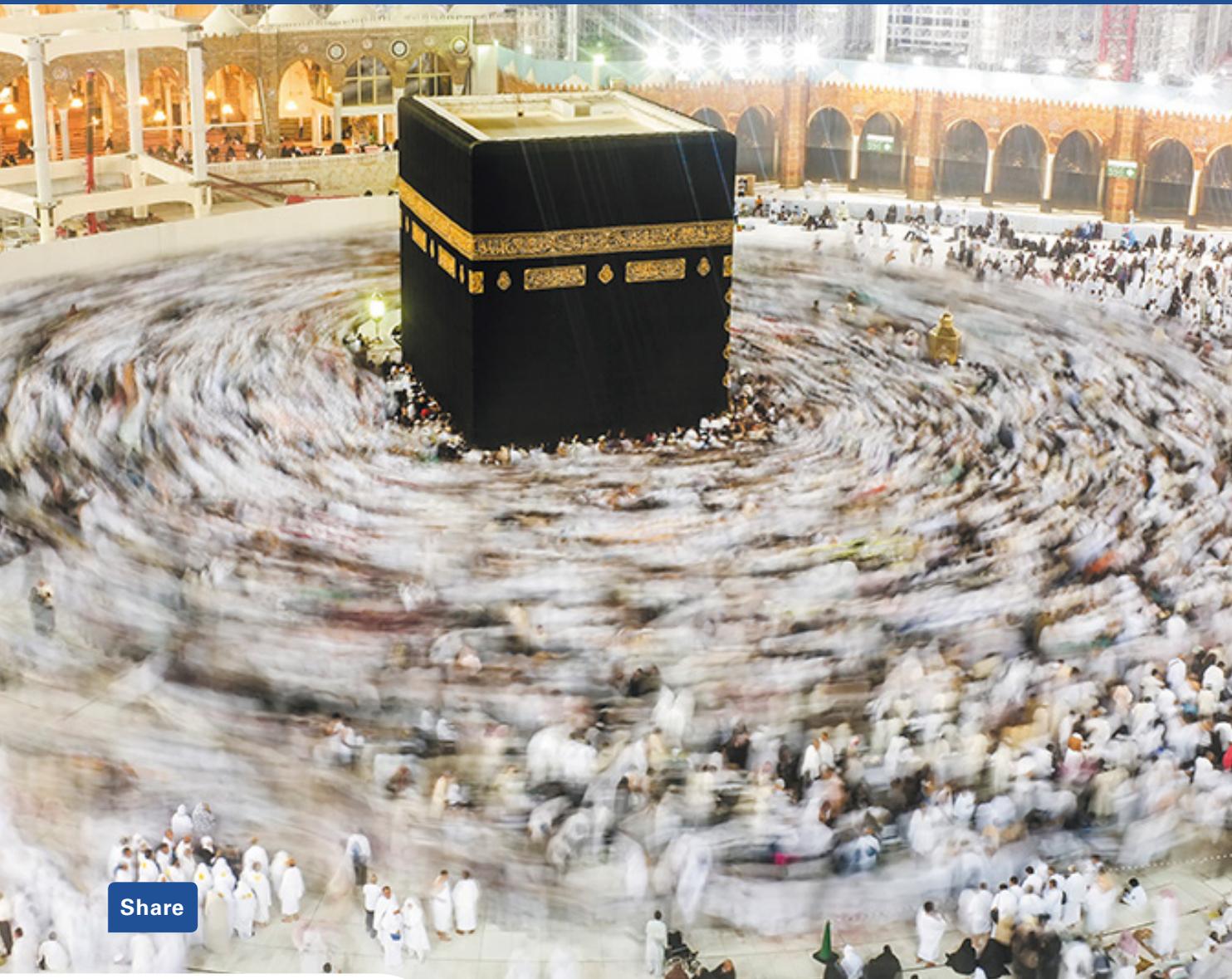


# >THE ARAB-ISLAMIC WORLD AND GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS: ENDOGENOUS VS. EXOGENOUS FACTORS



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Image: One of the Islamic rituals is to move around the Kaaba, or the Black Stone of Mecca, seven times in a counter-clockwise direction.



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# >THE ARAB-ISLAMIC WORLD AND GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS: ENDOGENOUS VS. EXOGENOUS FACTORS

This chapter engages critically the history and geopolitics of the Arab-Islamic world. By integrating history, policy analysis, and neuroscientific insights on leadership and political change, this chapter conveys a more holistic understanding of endogenous and exogenous factors that have shaped and continue to shape the region. It also charts a way forward for sustainable, secure and prosperous governance paradigms specific to each area within the region. Globally, it advocates a more thorough acknowledgment of the Arab-Islamic contributions to human civilization, and a greater appreciation for what the author calls the “*Ocean Model of Human Civilization*”, where cultures are interconnected, cumulative, and where cultures do not arise ex nihilo.

## Background

In the early years of the 20th century, the region of the Balkans was often referred to as the “powder keg of Europe.” The animosities in the region, surging nationalistic sentiments in the newly independent states, and Great Power meddling meant the region was seething with discord. These tensions reached a breaking point that finally escalated into war: the First World War started after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian nationalist.

No conflict in the Arab-Islamic world has ever started a world conflagration of the magnitude of either WWI or WWII but the region has been at the heart of global politics and a hotbed of incessant power plays since the early years of the 20th and into the 21st centuries.

In fact, few conflicts across the Arab-Islamic world in the past six decades have remained local, despite never escalating into a full-blown “world” conflagration. Nevertheless, they implicated internal and external actors, and had immense human and material costs, with spillover effects across the globe. The number of casualties, severity of injuries and destruction left behind by successive wars and invasions in the area are so pronounced in magnitude that they are virtually impossible to quantify. One thing is certain and that is the fact that the Arab-Islamic world has had anything but a marginal place in international politics; the geopolitics of the Arab-Islamic world are profoundly tied to world politics and have implications far beyond the region’s borders.

I have previously analyzed the history of the region over the past century, and the processes whereby the Arab-Islamic world has been weakened, by identifying critical “turning points”. I identified six turning points over the last century:

1. 1915-22, when the Arab world was divided by colonial powers; 2. the British withdrawal from Palestine and the emergence of the Palestinian question; 3. the 1967 war and the Arab defeat; 4. the 1979 revolution in Iran and its after effects for regional politics; 5. 1987-1991, a critical interval when the Palestinian intifada and the first Gulf war started; 6. 11 September 2001, the attacks in the US and the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and subsequently Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The series of protests and political upheavals known as the Arab Spring, which started in late 2010 and effectively led to one of the greatest – and most negative – transformations of the region since decolonization, could qualify as a seventh critical turning point. In trying to understand what has shaped the geopolitics of the region, it is crucial to examine its history and the sort of dignity deficits that persist to varying degrees across the region.

At the height of the Suez crisis of 1956, historian Albert Hourani wrote that “[He] who rules the Near East rules the world; and he who has interests in the world is bound to concern himself with the Near East.”<sup>2</sup>

## “THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE ARAB-ISLAMIC WORLD ARE PROFOUNDLY TIED TO WORLD POLITICS AND HAVE IMPLICATIONS FAR BEYOND THE REGION’S BORDERS.”

This echoes Harold Mackinder’s previous geopolitical formula in his famous Heartland Theory, discussing geopolitical pivots.<sup>3</sup> In 1919, following WWI, he had written that who rules East Europe rules the Heartland (Eurasia), who rules the Heartland rules the World-Island (the whole of Europe and Asia), and the world”:

Nowadays, we could probably paraphrase this further into a different kind of dictum: “An actor with a vested interest in the Syrian conflict has a stake in global geopolitics and whoever wants to maintain *regional or global* leadership must get involved in resolving the Syrian conflict”. Nevertheless, relying on dictums such as these can lead to fallacies or to deterministic views of global politics. The validity of geopolitical formulae rarely lasts for more than a few decades, before new actors and shifts in power emerge. It could thus be said that the ascendance of China moved the zone of interest further east but that is not to say that the geopolitics of the Arab-Islamic became just a regional affair. As in the past, the Arab-Islamic world is of profound significance to global politics.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight some of the key trends across the region and look at *endogenous* and *exogenous* factors that have shaped the

region in recent years and continue to do so presently – with a view to reflecting on the general direction for the present and coming years.

A note on terminology: the term Arab-Islamic is preferred here to “the Middle East” because it covers the wider region – not just the group of countries in the Middle East.

The Arab-Islamic world is by no means a homogenous entity. Tunisia, Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are different sovereign entities, with different leadership structures, and at times divergent foreign policy goals and approaches. The region is, however, strongly bound together by historical, cultural and political connections as well as by a history of pan-Arab and pan-Islamic movements and trends.

### A Contested Notion

In a *Foreign Affairs* essay in July 1960, historian Roderic H. Davison asked: “Where is the Middle East?” – answering his own question by stating “the fact remains that no one knows where the Middle East is, although many claim to know”. Indeed, in the aftermath of World War II, the United States quickly became involved in a series of crisis in Suez, Baghdad, Algeria and Lebanon, all lumped together under the label “Middle East”.<sup>4</sup>

The clear definition of the “Middle East” has been contentious and divisive, and the selection of countries which are part of it rather arbitrary. European imperialism first crystallized a geographical notion of the “Near East” but the first years of the 20th century led to the appearance of a new geopolitical region, the “Middle East” – coined by an American naval officer, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan. In his view, however, this region had rather vaguely defined borders, indeterminately comprising the area between the Suez and Singapore.<sup>5</sup> Later, the “East” was divided up into Near, Middle and Far, and mostly as a result of British strategy. After WWI, a somewhat clearer delineation was established, whereby the Near East only comprised the Balkans – a decision taken by the Permanent Commission on Geographical Names of the British Royal Geographical Society. The portion of land from the Bosphorus to the east of India was to be called the “Middle East”. Winston Churchill, who became Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1921, set up a Middle Eastern Department in the Colonial Office and had a major role in how the region was divided, the future of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. In any case, the new re-drawing of the Middle East created some confusion for the Americans who for a period continued to use the concept as previously defined. Even in the case of Britain, the new interpretation of where the Middle East started and ended was a definition mostly accepted within the Royal Air Force.

### A Troubled Century

To understand the geopolitics of the Arab-Islamic world, it is imperative to make an incursion into its troubled 20th century history.

During WWI, the greatest point of contention between France and Britain was over the French claims to Ottoman Syria. Absorbed in the trench battles on the western front, however, France encountered significant difficulty securing control over its Middle Eastern spheres of influence – and was apprehensively watching Britain’s increasing involvement in the region.

In May 1916, an act of profound historical and symbolic significance was the conclusion of a secret agreement that divided up most of the Middle East between the two powers – the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This extremely controversial document of war was a perfect illustrator of the meddling of outside powers in the region, which awarded each other zones of control and influence. France received the right to control Syria as a zone of “direct control” – a region stretching along the Syrian coast, from southern Lebanon into Anatolia; in addition, France was also granted the right of indirect control of the Syrian interior. Britain secured its position in Iraq and a right to direct control of the southern part of Mesopotamia, as well as a huge portion of indirect control from Gaza to Kirkuk (in present-day northern Iraq).<sup>6</sup>

This infamous agreement is regarded as an act of betrayal of historic proportions. It constituted an especially great breach of the promise initially made to Sharif Husayn ibn Ali, the emir of Mecca, who had planned to create an independent Arab state once the war ended. In his exchange of notes with Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Husayn was told that the area west of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo could not be included in his proposal because the inhabitants of those areas were not “purely Arab” – a claim Husayn vehemently rejected.<sup>7</sup>

Then, in 1917, another moment of historic importance was the Balfour Declaration – one of the most controversial documents shaping the relations between Western powers and the Arab-Islamic world. In a succinct 67-word text, the Declaration proclaimed that “His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object.” In a bizarre display of colonial might and double-dealing, one nation was “promising another nation the land of a third nation.”<sup>8</sup>

After World War I, the Middle East became an immensely complicated region also due to the fact that the core of what a 400-year-old social and political order, the Ottoman Empire, was suddenly fragmented into states: Turkey, and five new Arab states: Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Transjordan. However, foreign control was rampant in the region and so of all the ten countries in this area, only Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen exercised full sovereignty during the interwar years.<sup>9</sup> As a result, not only the promise of the Arab state was not fulfilled, but the region saw itself divided and subject to external influence. Imperial control over the region was, compared to the colonial experience in Asia, Africa or Latin America, short-lived. Within a decade or two, the former Ottoman territories

received independence: Iraq in 1932, Egypt 1936 (following the Anglo-Egyptian treaty), Syria and Lebanon in 1943 and 1946, and Jordan in 1946. However, the effects were profound and long-lasting. A massive process of social and political change followed.<sup>10</sup>

For a start, the colonial powers started to become more interested in oil. Prior to WWI, the exploration of oil had been limited to Iran and what is today northern Iraq. But, as the British navy transitioned from coal to oil in 1914, and the availability of oil in the Gulf became evident – as well as the fact that it was relatively safe to transport – oil became increasingly important. At this time, in addition to British dominance in the region, France was well in control of Syria and Lebanon – together with the area it controlled in North Africa, and Italy was also becoming interested in the wider region; it occupied Ethiopia in 1935 as part of its imperial ambitions (“Africana Italiana”).<sup>11</sup> At this point, the interest of the Soviet Union and of the United States in the wider Middle East region remained rather limited.

### “THE REGION SAW ITSELF DIVIDED AND SUBJECT TO EXTERNAL INFLUENCE.”

The Soviet Union, recently established in 1922, showed support for what appeared to be Bolshevik-inspired revolutions in Northern Iran and some radical movements in Turkey. However, by and large, the USSR was on the margins of the Arab-Islamic world and was more inclined to seek peace with the nationalist regimes along its southern border (Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan) and seal off the Middle East – a situation which continued until the late 1980s. The US, for its part, also had very limited military and political interests in the Arab-Islamic world at the time, although it is noteworthy that under President Wilson, it played a key role in setting up the League of Nations and with it the trusteeship system which allowed France and Britain to take control of large swathes of the region.<sup>12</sup>

These foreign machinations cannot, however, be blamed for all the ills of the region and it is critical to underline a few other developments which are endogenous in nature, or that concern regional politics rather than foreign powers’ direct involvement. The interwar years, especially, saw profound changes within states. The most important of these transitions was the creation of modern state institutions, run by nationalist governments, and very expansive public sectors, employing a large number of people – including armed forces. A related development was the process of nation-building and the forging of national identities, but this task was immensely complicated given the rather clumsily drawn borders disregarding ethnic groupings or previous socio-economic relations, and regional geopolitics.

Iraq, for example, was among the most unfortunate of the British experiments, as the boundaries of the new state were the most arbitrary of all the territories in the post-Ottoman Arab world. This historical case is relevant not just for

exemplifying the extent of British interference in the Middle East, but also to explain some of the recent challenges of the country in achieving social and political stability. During Ottoman times, Mesopotamia had been administered as three distinct provinces. The northern part of Mosul was connected to Anatolia and Greater Syria, while the southern region of Baghdad had strong trade links to Iran and the south-west. Basra, in the south, was more connected to the Persian Gulf and had trade ties with regions as remote as India. As they became the state of Iraq under British mandate in 1920, these regions could not be considered a political community "in any sense of the term."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, although the population displayed a strong Arab majority (around 80% Arabs and about 20% Kurds), the Arabs were divided along religious lines: over half of them were Shia and the rest Sunnis.

Another important development across several countries in these years was the process of secularization, which was met with strong resistance and counter-moves for a return to more traditional values. The strongest manifestation of this move was the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928, as a reaction to the secularizing trends across Turkey and the Arab World. The Muslim Brotherhood was originally peaceful but later turned to more violent tactics.

The many social and political problems of the entire Arab-Islamic world in the interwar years and then during World War II simply indicated that although they were making strides towards nationhood and full independence, foreign influence and power games were hardly a thing of the past.

Mismanagement from within should not be downplayed either. Additionally, some of the countries of the region had some political ambitions of their own, which added to the complicated geopolitical situation of the Arab Islamic world. Egypt, for instance, was eyeing Sudan (based on an older claim to the unity of the Nile valley) and Iraq was especially interested in the wider "Fertile crescent" area. A common political goal started, however, to emerge in the form of support for Palestine, which later led to the formation of the League of Arab States in

Egyptian women march to Tahrir square in an anti-Muslim Brotherhood protest in 2013.



March 1945, headquartered in Cairo. Together, countries of the League of Arab States vehemently opposed the partition of Palestine and the massive uprooting of the Palestinian Arab population as a result of the creation of the state of Israel.

A sense of solidarity and shared destiny united the Arab world despite the failure to prevent the emergence of Israel. The Cold War brought new challenges and, increasingly, new actors in the Arab-Islamic world. It also brought waves of political upheavals, military crisis and coups, all of which involved foreign powers in various ways. The US was mostly interested in the Middle East through the prism of its conflict with the USSR, but even so, its political and economic interests did not fully overlap. It was especially interested in Israel for political and strategic interests and in the Arabian Peninsula for economic interests – i.e. oil. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, did establish alliances with some Arab regimes but was overall less interested in the region. Notably, the Soviet Union was the greatest producer of oil in the world in the 1970s – estimated at 12 mbd.<sup>14</sup> Before its collapse, in 1988, the USSR was producing a record of 12.5 mbd of oil.<sup>15</sup>

This is not to downplay the involvement and interests of foreign actors in the Arab-Islamic world during the Cold War. After World War II, several countries in the region achieved independence but others took decades more to do so: Tunisia and Morocco obtained independence from France in 1956 and Algeria followed in 1962.

In 1952, the revolution in Egypt led by a group of military officers (the so-called “Free Officers”) headed by Gamal Abd al-Nasser, overturned the rule of the king and proclaimed Egypt a republic. The Suez crisis of 1956 was a watershed moment: in 1956 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, previously built with Egyptian labour, operated by a French company and used by the British Empire. The event led to an international crisis, military action by the French, British and Israelis, and finally a UN-backed ceasefire.

However, by far, the greatest and most visible of the series of crisis in the Arab Islamic world during the Cold War, which still carries relevance in today’s politics, was the Arab-Israeli conflict. In 1967, in a pre-emptive strike, Israel defeated the joint military offensive of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. This left enduring memories in the region. It dealt a strong blow to Arab nationalism and prestige (and, to some extent, galvanized the deterioration of relations between Arab states and the USSR – for example, Egypt later cancelled the Friendship Treaty with the USSR), stoked Palestinian nationalism, and Israel continued its offensive actions to establish its position in the region. As it was becoming apparent that Israel had a strong ally in the US, it invaded Lebanon in June 1982 with tacit agreement from Reagan who was all too approving of actions to “go after” Soviet allies, such as Syria and the PLO.<sup>16</sup> Syria maintained, however, closer relations to the Soviet Union until the end of the Cold War (and beyond).

Several regional rifts occurred after the Camp David accords of 1978. One part of this agreement was an Egypt-Israel peace treaty that cost Egypt

its relations with its Arab allies. It was soon expelled from the Arab League, whose headquarters were moved to Tunis. Additionally, Egypt stopped receiving subsidies from its oil-producing neighbors, making it dependent on the West. President Sadat grew increasingly unpopular. As social tensions grew in the country, the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been allowed to resume activities, achieved considerable success in its recruitment campaigns. Other militant organizations were increasingly active too, leading Sadat to take action and order mass imprisonments in September 1981.<sup>17</sup> Soon after, in October, he was killed by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and succeeded by Hosni Mubarak, who ruled Egypt until 2011.

Domestic politics were turbulent across most Arab-Islamic states in the Cold War years. Lebanon went through a civil war from 1975 to 1990, where both endogenous and exogenous factors contributed. Demographic changes and a very fragmented, sectarian social structure frustrated many Muslim Lebanese, who complained about the gap in representation between Christians and Muslims, despite the fact that Muslims outnumbered Christians. Then, exogenous factors added to the dramatic destruction of the war. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and inflamed the political crisis for over a decade. Syria and Iraq traversed years of instability and consolidated brutally authoritarian regimes.

Government overreach manifested itself in many ways. The Ba'ath party in Syria nationalized over 100 companies in 1965 and began expropriating and redistributing private land. In 1970, when Hafez al-Assad seized power, the main exported commodity was cotton and the economy had a strong agrarian base. The regime soon started nationalizing firms, industrial plants, and infrastructure. For some time, the economy recorded a boom, which could not be sustained for too long, and soon the country had to import huge amounts of food. Corruption plagued the entire system, clientelism and nepotism became rampant, building an unprofessional public sector. For example, members of the Ba'ath party who had to be rewarded for their loyalty were offered positions in the agricultural sector and empowered to make decisions on technical aspects on which they had no competency, such as crop rotation. On matters of foreign policy, al-Assad's regime had a troubled record too. After initially trying to position itself as a potential regional leader and driver of pan-Arab unity, al-Assad something of a pariah after Syria's involvement in the Lebanese civil war – where he intervened in support of the Maronite Christians in 1976.<sup>18</sup>

Iraq also faced a long period of instability. A coup overthrew the monarchy in 1958 and deepened the pre-existent social and political unrest. In 1968, another coup brought the Ba'ath party to power and a political figure to the forefront, Saddam Hussein. In 1979, he succeeded the former president, Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, and started a wave of political purges. The country was already a mosaic of ethnic groups and the new ruling party had major difficulties containing the political tensions, particularly related to the Kurdish population, concentrated in the oil-rich north of the country. Against the

backdrop of the growingly hostile regime of Saddam Hussein, Iran attempted to undermine it by providing weapons to the Kurds with a view to weakening the government in Baghdad. Iran and Iraq, however, reached an agreement in 1975 (the Algiers Agreement). The Kurds reached an agreement with the government of Baghdad and were offered some modest cultural and political autonomy, but later, Baghdad displaced 250,000 Kurds and relocated them in the central and south of the country, in order to prevent future rebellions. The hope and struggle of the Kurds was however rekindled over the next decades and gained new momentum after the Gulf War in 1991.<sup>19</sup>

## “A SENSE OF SOLIDARITY AND SHARED DESTINY UNITED THE ARAB WORLD DESPITE THE FAILURE TO PREVENT THE EMERGENCE OF ISRAEL.”

Relations between Iraq and Iran became tense again after the Shah was overthrown and Ayatollah Khomeini came to power – the latter openly urged the Iraqi Shia to overthrow Saddam Hussein. The Algiers Agreement was officially abrogated by Khomeini in 1980, which soon led to the invasion of Iran by Iraq, and the beginning of the longest conventional war of the 20th century. The human and material costs were enormous. The war inevitably changed the geopolitical situation in the Arab-Islamic world. Foreign powers became heavily implicated, especially as weapons suppliers. Iraq’s oil exports and revenues were severely limited, and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia assisted Iraq financially. In these new circumstances, Iraq also changed its stance towards Israel and restored relations with Egypt, which started supplying it with ammunition and military support. Other allies were the USSR and France, and, from 1974, the US, which restored diplomatic ties with Iraq, having cut them in 1967. The US pressured its allies to stop selling weapons to Iran and visibly increased its own military presence in the Gulf.

### Post-Cold War and into the 2000s

The war ended in 1988 with an UN-sponsored ceasefire. Iraq was badly hit by the war, large parts of its infrastructure were destroyed and a huge debt had to be paid to the Arab Gulf states. Yet another effect of the war was an increase in nationalistic ethos in a deeply divided country, as well as much more reverence for the Iraqi military, which increased in size and combat force.<sup>20</sup> In August 1990 Iraq launched an ill-conceived invasion of Kuwait, blaming it for low oil prices – thus starting the First Gulf War. This rallied a large international coalition against Iraq, and led the UN Security Council to impose a round of sanctions against Iraq, further hurting the economy. From 1990 to 2003, the Iraqi economy was battered by hyperinflation, which affected common Iraqis the most, including widespread cases of malnutrition.



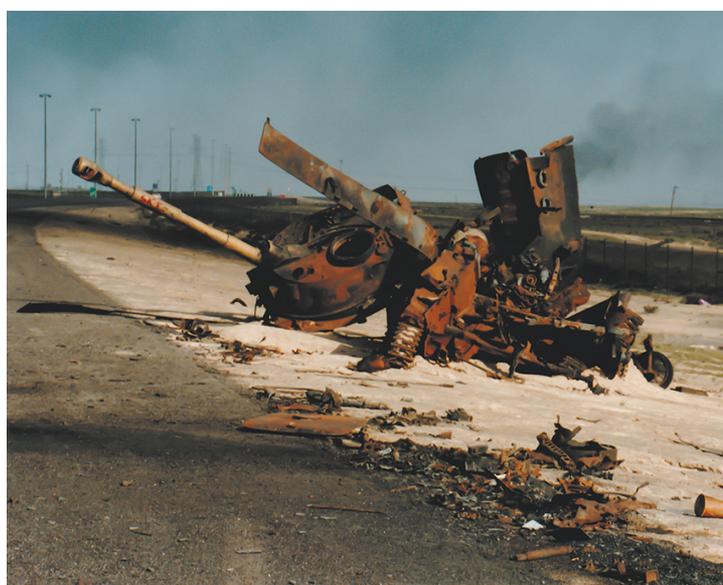
It is, however, important to note that the exact figures about sanctions-related casualties and infant mortality have been widely disputed in recent studies. A common conclusion in Western circles was that around 500,000 children had died in Iraq as a result of the sanctions. Justifying the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which toppled Saddam, British Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted the invasion had been the “right” decision because it benefited the Iraqi people. He went on to argue that from a child mortality rate of 130 per 1,000 children under the age of five in 2000-2002, in 2010, the figure had dropped to 40. Yet these figures were based on claims made in a controversial survey organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in cooperation with the Iraqi government in 1995, in which the interviewers for the survey were provided by the Iraqi ministry itself. It was, therefore, not an independent survey, and conducted in a climate of fear for the Iraqi people, in which the government wanted to report they had suffered many more child deaths.<sup>21</sup>

Other countries not embroiled in war or recovering from a recently ended war, were traversing tense periods of social change and political crises. On top of this, the old conflict between Israel and Palestine took new turns. As with the Arab Spring in 2011, apparently small incidents proved able to trigger greater revolutions. In 2011, it was an incident between the security forces and a street vendor in Tunisia. In 1987, a car accident in which an Israeli military vehicle killed four Palestinians and injured others led to large-scale protests. Without much foresight, the Israeli army retaliated by killing protesters, which sparked a full-blown uprising in the West Bank. This was the beginning of the *Intifada*, the Palestinian resistance that was seeking an end to the miserable living conditions and restrictions placed on Palestinians. It soon acquired a more coherent and organized format, under the coordination of the Unified National Leadership.

In 1988, Hamas – which is the Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement, was created, with a more intransigent and radical agenda than that of the PLO. The Israeli response was brutal and decisive in quelling the uprising and the forms of solidarity that had sustained it in the initial years. On the initiative of the Norwegian government, secret talks were facilitated between PLO and Israeli

Right: Remains of Iraqi armor on the road to Kuwait, after the failed occupation attempt by Saddam Hussein.

Left: Oil refineries in Kuwait.



representatives, starting the Oslo Peace Process. The prospects of dialogue and genuine peace seemed real for a while, but the legacy of the years of meetings and negotiations eventually proved weak.

For the countries in the Arabian Peninsula, the political and military situation was challenging too, although in a different way. As it is well-known, the discovery of oil changed the geopolitics of the region in profound ways and presented unique opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, vast wealth allowed for rapid development and for the use of financial assistance as a foreign policy tool. On the other hand, these countries chose to remain politically and socially conservative, which often increased tensions with their neighbors, such as Egypt's Nasser, who was advocating for secular Pan-Arabism.<sup>22</sup>

## “THE DISCOVERY OF OIL CHANGED THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE REGION IN PROFOUND WAYS AND PRESENTED UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES.”

The situation in Yemen was a source of tension and concern in the Peninsula for many years, and especially for Saudi Arabia. In 1962, Yemen was plunged into a civil war following a failed coup supported by Nasser. Saudi Arabia intervened to help the royalists bring the ruling Imam back to the throne. The conflict quickly escalated into a regional conflict. Nasser committed as many as 70,000 Egyptian soldiers to Yemen (some estimates cite between 40,000 and 70,000), but the conflict cost Egypt up to 10,000 soldiers. In 1967, the Egyptian forces withdrew, the Saudis stopped their support to the royalists and the leaders of the opposing factions started negotiations. Morocco, Iraq and Sudan supervised the withdrawal of foreign troops and the conflict ended with a compromise between the royalist and republican factions in 1970.<sup>23</sup>

Countries in North Africa also traversed periods of crises following independence, or fully-fledged civil war in the case of Algeria. State-dominated economies, nationalizations and corruption often went hand in hand. However, for several years, the region also recorded dramatic gains in employment (in the public sector) and an overall improvement in life expectancy, decrease in infant mortality and an increase in literacy and school enrolment.

The economic shocks of the 1980s and the decline in oil prices, which resulted in a decrease in public revenue and a greater strain on governments to meet public sector wage bills. Across the region, especially in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan, policy reforms were enacted to cut subsidies and lower public expenditure. However, the 1990s saw a continuing downward trend due to the volatility of oil prices, the failure to implement robust economic reforms, and demographic changes that put high pressure on the labor market. Population growth peaked

in 1985 at 3.4%, and although it fell to 2.2% in the 1990s, these trends had clear impacts, leading to the rapid expansion of the working-age population.<sup>24</sup> These factors, coupled with repressive policies, and the rise of social media contributed to the wave of Arab revolutions that started in 2011.

## The 2000s

The 9/11 attacks at the World Trade Centre marked a turning point in the region, as the US rallied global support for an invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, which left aftershocks that still reverberate today. The war in Iraq affected the region enormously and deepened the sense of injustice, humiliation and deliberate disempowerment among Arabs.

However, the dignity deficits plaguing the region were, of course, not only external.

When the revolutions now collectively known as the “Arab Spring” started unfolding in 2011, they were first met with a wave of optimism – both from the inside, and from the outside world watching carefully. In hindsight, we could now argue that they were doomed to fail because they were seen as an attempt by the Obama Administration to undermine the status quo and empower the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran.

The economy of many countries in the region had been in an abysmal state for many years: surging unemployment, rampant corruption, state-led development and hefty public spending meant that economic development was lagging. Indeed, the development model across the region had reached its expiry date. The MENA region depends heavily on food imports, and many Arab countries even today continue to spend significant amounts of money on subsidizing food items. In Egypt, for instance, food subsidies (mostly of wheat) cost \$3 billion in 2010, the year before Hosni Mubarak was swept from power after almost 30 years as Egyptian President. Additionally, many countries in the region have oil-based economies, making them vulnerable to the volatility of oil markets.<sup>25</sup>

This economic model survived for a few decades partly due to generous inflows of remittances, but it was essentially built on oil, aid fortunes and a very expansive public sector, which eventually became an economic and political liability. As job availability in the public sector could not meet demand, many young people realized that they are not only unemployed but effectively *unemployable* because of the failures and disconnection between the economy and the education systems. No analysis of the Arab Spring can disregard economic factors and the fragility of the social contract established between these countries and their populace. (Nor, for that matter, can it ignore external manipulation.)

The response from many countries was to reinforce this frail contract. Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Kuwait did precisely that: they increased subsidies on food and fuel. Other oil-rich countries have increased

salaries in the public sector.<sup>26</sup> What the region has yet to achieve is to re-think the social contract beyond these kinds of relationships and allow for more entrepreneurial, dynamic and competitive markets to emerge. However, the economics of the Arab Spring hardly tells the full story of the revolutions. Protesting on the streets of many Arab cities were not just the jobless youth, but also other citizens who were desperately demanding an end to abuses, and more openness. What eventually brought the region to boiling point was the lack of dignity.

Dignity deficits, personal and collective, were the underlying cause of the revolutions. This is, of course, not dissociated from problems stemming from a lack of opportunities and employment, a sense of powerlessness and socio-economic vulnerability, but was also grounded in the humiliation and resentment felt by so many people in the region for reasons that were not economic in nature. In addition, there was also a sense that external forces were interested in manipulating the situation and redrawing regional geopolitics.

Collective dignity deficits were the result of autocratic regimes, supported by foreign powers with short-term geopolitical interests. However, these regimes started to lose their grip on power when the revolts gained momentum. To the surprise of many, dictators that had comfortably ruled for decades were fiercely contested from within with fervent demands for “karama” – Arabic for dignity.<sup>27</sup>

The event that triggered the revolutions was a ‘minor’ incident but a breaking point for people who had endured abuse from government institutions and who had for many years felt hopeless about their future.

On December 17 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Sidi Bouazid, Tunisia, had his vegetable cart confiscated by the police and was asked to pay a bribe. Deeply shaken, Bouazizi, the breadwinner of his family of eight, went to complain to the provincial headquarters only to be ignored and dismissed. He returned to the same place an hour later and set himself on fire, in protest against the humiliation he had endured and the sense of powerlessness he felt. But the move was also a desperate call for dignity. In the words of his mother: “Mohammed did what he did for the sake of his dignity.”<sup>28</sup> Revolts and shows of solidarity quickly spread throughout the country and days after his death, on 14 January 2011, President Ben Ali fled the country. The protests, however, did not stop and gained terrain in other Arab countries.

The quest for dignity was central to people’s demands for change. The dignity deficit had an *individual* dimension insofar as citizens (and those who could not access benefits reserved for the wealthy and powerful) were affected by abuses and corruption, as well as a *collective* dimension, stemming from a sense that the Arab world had suffered for many decades from cultural and political siege.<sup>29</sup>

As I have written elsewhere<sup>30</sup>, the yearning for dignity is a driving force in history and the revolutions of the Arab Spring were a visible embodiment of that goal. On

the domestic front, these countries fared quite miserably on the dignity index.

On a related terminological and methodological note, I previously proposed a dignity index as an assessment tool to study key indicators of good governance. I defined dignity not merely as the absence of humiliation, but as a more comprehensive concept, which includes nine key human needs, all of which are matched against the key attributes of human nature. These are: reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation, and inclusiveness.<sup>31</sup>

The regimes toppled by the Arab Spring, as well as those shaken by street protests or thrown into civil war (as is the case of Syria), did not score well on the 'dignity index'. Their failure to meet dignity needs also explains why the region's stability continues to be tested year after year. Tunisia, which was hailed as the success story of the Arab Spring, saw a new wave of protests five years after the revolutions began. In February 2016, a series of events in the country resurfaced a familiar picture: a young Tunisian died from electrocution while protesting against poverty, the lack of jobs, and the unfulfilled promises of the revolution, with a group of other young people. Many also expressed frustration at the excessive hurdles stifling entrepreneurs and investors, who could not access loans despite repeated attempts to set up businesses.<sup>32</sup> More unrest soon flared up, with more young people expressing anguish and desperation at the inefficiency perpetuated across the public sector. As long as domestic governance does not address the causes for the frustration and alienation felt by its people, no real political stability can be achieved. Meeting dignity needs is the best predictor of good governance and implicitly of political stability and security in the long term.<sup>33</sup>

The worsening situation following the Arab Spring led many commentators to instead speak of a coming long winter. The Failed States Index, prepared yearly by the Fund for Peace, took stock of this in their 2015 edition, noting that the hope for reforms was slowly evaporating, with countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen seeing particularly steep declines across all indicators of state stability. 2014 saw the deterioration of the political situation in Libya, as militant groups dislodged the government's authority and the internationally-recognized government was forced to depart and resettle in the eastern city of Tobruk.<sup>34</sup>

Another particularly distressing event took place in 2014. In June, the Iraqi army capitulated in a matter of days faced with the strikingly fast advance of ISIS. This event was the culmination of several factors not without precedent across MENA. While the very creation and rise of ISIS was a byproduct of foreign meddling in the region (it is now known that the group appeared following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the premature American departure), domestic failures should not be downplayed either.

Indeed, when domestic inefficiency meets foreign meddling, the result is a catastrophic combustion.

The most significant test for the Iraqi army since the US invasion ended as an extraordinary failure that created the possibility of complete state dissolution. In 2013, the Iraqi government had spent \$17 billion on its security forces (\$1.3 billion of which was funded by the US), yet 30,000 Iraqi soldiers fled in less than 48 hours when a band of less than 1,000 ISIS terrorists smashed their way into Mosul.<sup>35</sup> The fall of Mosul was with a notable shock for the government, which accused the army of betrayal. At the same time, the event exposed some of the deeper problems of domestic mismanagement.

Politicization and sectarian divisions in the army left many disenchanted and ready to flee when danger was on the horizon. The Iraqi government had refused to sign an agreement with the US to extend US presence in the country and continue training the military. Then prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, who also was de facto minister of defense and the interior, had already begun to subvert the non-

## “THE DIGNITY DEFICITS PLAGUING THE REGION WERE, OF COURSE, NOT ONLY EXTERNAL.”

sectarian, professional army, which contained many Sunni and Kurdish officers. Desiring to secure his position and ensure that the army would not pose a threat, al-Maliki began rewarding Shia loyalists with high-ranking positions, and corruption at the bottom became rife. This situation ended up frustrating all ethnic groups. Ultimately, the sectarian strategies employed in the creation of institutions backfired. Consequently, when Mosul was under siege, “Shia troops saw little point in dying to hold on to predominately Sunni cities.<sup>36</sup> So strong was the resentment against the status quo that in the early days of ISIS occupation, some voices from Mosul reportedly expressed relief that ISIS had taken over and that they were “liberated” from Maliki’s brutal and divisive sectarian forces. One resident expressed what many felt in those days: “I feel we have been liberated of an awful nightmare (...). The army and the police never stopped arresting, detaining and killing people, let alone the bribes they were taken from the detainees’ families.”<sup>37</sup>

In July 2017, the government declared Mosul “liberated” from ISIS, following heavy fighting and military support from the US. Yet eliminating ISIS from Iraqi territories does little to end the cycle of instability and state weakness. Iraqi Kurds have recently mounted a campaign to rally US support for an independent Kurdistan. A referendum was scheduled for 25 September 2017, announced by the president of Iraqi Kurdistan. The bid for independence spans decades and was fueled by repeated episodes of alienation. Indeed, at almost all points in their history inside Iraq, Kurds struggled with the centralized rule in Baghdad and felt their rights were not duly respected. Although under the Constitution, the Kurdish region is entitled to 17% of the national budget, in 2014, after a dispute over oil sales, then-Prime Minister Maliki refused to send the required payment to the Kurdistan

Regional Government.<sup>38</sup> The US and other regional players might eventually get involved diplomatically, yet the problem ultimately remains a domestic one – as is the solution.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, I advocated for indigenous solutions to the Middle East’s governance problems. There is no one-size-fits-all solution and initiatives that can be applied in some North African countries might not work well in the Gulf, and vice-versa.<sup>39</sup> In order to tackle the many facets of the dignity deficits besetting the region – personal and collective – the countries of the region need to move forward decisively to improve their respective governance models and institutions, as well as to prepare for the technological challenges of today, and – critically – to build more robust economies by enacting reforms that diversify the economy, too often reliant on oil.

### Forgotten and Persistent Histories

This chapter has dwelt on history extensively because history is obstinately present in the contemporary geopolitics of the Arab-Islamic world. Key events such as the 1967 or 1973 wars and the ensuing geopolitical revamping of the region should not be lost in any regional analysis. To this day, most believe that one of the main reasons Israel had won in 1967 was because it was an extension of Western imperialism and Western machinations – through military, political

Military vehicle greeted by a group of children in Afghanistan.





and economic support. The 1967 pre-emptive invasion by Israel left enduring pains across the Arab world, but it also led many Arab intellectuals to urge for more radical social and political reforms to transcend the defeat. Yet, the moment of cultural fermentation soon subsided, as autocratic regimes tightened their grip on power.<sup>40</sup>

There is another facet of history which is a source of frustration for many Arabs. Long before the West became a dominant force in the world, the Arab-Islamic world was a thriving centre for science, culture and civilization. This lost dimension of history only added to the sense of disrespect that many Arabs feel from the West. While the dominant narrative about the rise of the West tells us that European civilization is founded on Greco-Latin roots, and that 'Islam in Europe' is a recent (and threatening) presence, in reality, the European and Arab-Islamic worlds have been engaged in fruitful exchanges for centuries. In its golden days, the Arab-Islamic world hosted centers like Baghdad, Cairo, Cordova, Toledo, Sicily and others that attracted erudite minds from far and wide. Indeed, history shows us that no historical age or phenomena is achieved in isolation, but rather by building on the achievements and contributions of others. Just as the Arab-Islamic world built on developments of earlier empires, Europe later incorporated elements of the Arab-Islamic world. Transfers of science and technology to Medieval Europe from the Arab-Islamic world paved the way for the European scientific revolution and later the Enlightenment. Great contributions were made in mathematics, astronomy, natural sciences and medicine.<sup>41</sup>

There were, in other words, no major breakthroughs achieved purely by 'indigenous' European forces and by virtue of Europe's inherent superiority. European history is part of *global* history and this can be best described according to the 'ocean model of civilization'. This analogy presents a more accurate picture of history whereby human civilization is like an ocean into which many rivers flow and add depth. There is *one* human civilization, which is a result of contributions from other geo-cultural domains.<sup>42</sup>

One way to break the prevalence of Eurocentric assumption about the rise of the West is to give the Arab-Islamic world due recognition for its contributions. This is important because the incorrect narrative about the rise of the West has

Left: US Army deployment in a village in Iraq.

Right: Flags in demonstrations of support for the Syrian people in Europe.



given rise to a misleading image of a progressive and superior West, versus an inferior, stagnant or regressive Arab world.<sup>43</sup> This has infringed upon the collective dignity of the Arabs and it is important to repair this misconception both for the sake of doing justice to the Arab contributions in the rise of the West and human civilization as a whole, and also to help dissipate the idea of an incompatibility and inherent discord between the two.

### **Moving Forward and Prospects of Political Change**

As this chapter goes to press, the Arab-Islamic world has unresolved conflicts and a great deal of uncertainty still plaguing its development prospects. But it is also a region moving at multiple speeds. Some countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are among the fastest growing economies in the region, focusing on innovation and ways to diversify their economies (see, for instance, Saudi Vision 2030). Although still faced with great macroeconomic challenges, Tunisia, Jordan and Algeria are also displaying some positive signs of growth. Then, there are countries like Syria and Yemen, where the very survival of the state remains uncertain, with wars raging on, and where humanitarian crises of dramatic proportions prevail. Iraq has expelled ISIS but is reeling from the tensions and instability left behind. Risks of violence between Arab Sunni and Shia are high due to brutal sectarian militias supported by Iran. While the solutions to these problems will differ from case to case, a common requirement across the region is that policy responses relate to the needs of the people in the region and that they advance dignity-based policies and models of governance, without regional or global interference or manipulation.

### **“WHEN DOMESTIC INEFFICIENCY MEETS FOREIGN MEDDLING, THE RESULT IS A CATASTROPHIC COMBUSTION.”**

That is easier said than done, because political change is slow and requires a transformation at the neurochemical level. This argument seems surprising but it is grounded in neuroscientific research, which shows how power manifests itself at the neurochemical level. Power is expressed neurochemically by an increase in the dopamine level, the same neurochemical that produces a feeling of pleasure, aids in learning and is present in reward-based behavior. Power also produces a ‘high’, which is extremely addictive, meaning that the more power one has, the more power one seeks to accrue. In some sense, we are all addicts in some way or another, as our dopamine flows push us to engage repeatedly in reward-based activities.

Leaders in positions of power, especially authoritarian rulers who enjoy extreme power, will find it extremely difficult – indeed, painful – to relinquish their power. Many would rather die than give it up. In the absence of a system of checks-

and-balances, the quest for power can lead to more macabre results.<sup>44</sup> This insight from neuroscience not only explains power in neurochemical ways, but also provides hints about political change. To transform leadership cultures that have powerful, autocratic leaders at the helm, the best solution is to proceed gradually. But if history is any indication, change will occur sooner or later as humanity inevitably moves forward in a quest for personal and collective dignity. It is difficult to foresee the future trajectory of the Arab-Islamic world, a task also complicated by the fact that the countries of the region do not experience the same nature of challenges, and that the gaps between them are in fact widening.

While some countries are developing strategies for the coming decades, and thus lend themselves to more predictability, others are so volatile that their very survival is not certain. In addition, there are climate-related factors that will further test the resilience and adaptability of these countries, or simply add to their vulnerabilities. Technology might also transform the future of the Arab-Islamic world, although in markedly different ways. In the long run, artificial intelligence<sup>45</sup> and nanotechnology will impact geopolitics because they will affect all facets of state power (social and health issues, domestic politics, economy, the environment, science and human potential, military and the defense sector, diplomacy).<sup>46</sup>

## “WHAT CAN HELP REPAIR THE FRACTURES IN THE REGION, AND BETWEEN THE REGION AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD, IS EDUCATION.”

In the Arab world, the impact of new technologies will be felt in very different ways. A likely scenario is that new technologies will deepen the divide in the region, with some more capable of bearing the costs of integrating new technologies than others.

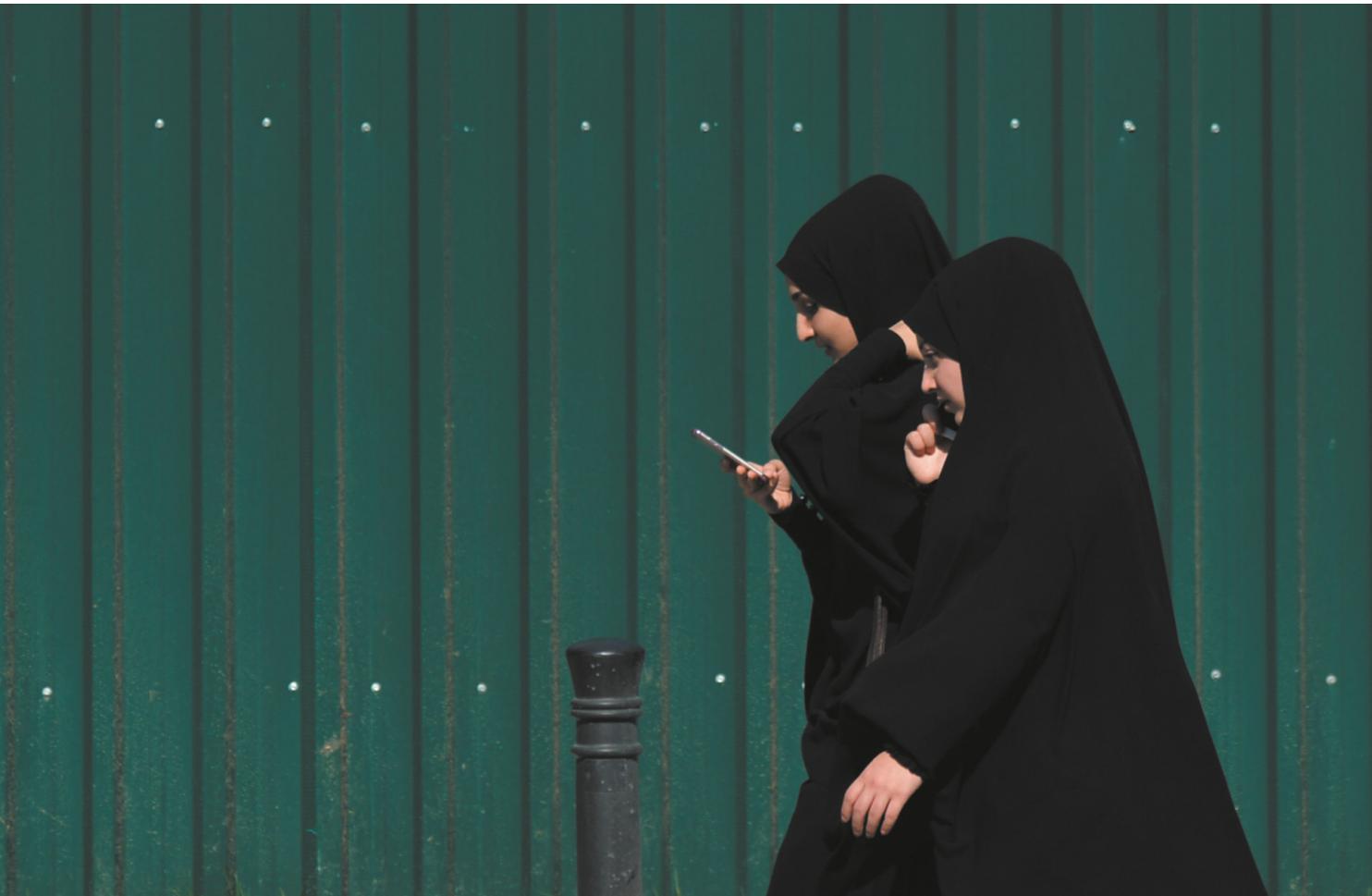
In the long run, what can help repair the fractures in the region, and between the region and the outside world, is education. Education is critical to national and global security because it can alter long-held misconceptions and, in the process, challenge the status quo, within and with the outside world. In the West, more inclusive curricula, which pay tribute to the Arab heritage in the history of the West, and recognize the centuries of collaboration and exchange between the Arab-Islamic world and Europe, can go a long way in creating a more favorable and accurate account of our shared history and common grounds.<sup>47</sup> The role of education should not be downplayed as naive or idealistic. Education and knowledge change minds almost in a literal sense: at a neurochemical level, knowledge is mediated by neurochemistry and neurochemical pathways.<sup>48</sup>

Our brains are highly malleable insofar as our neurochemistry can be altered by new information and new exposure. Knowledge and education are critical in demolishing sources of preconceptions, prejudice and tension. Such initiatives are more critical than ever. Education that teaches more tolerance and transcultural harmony is needed both within the region and beyond.

Moreover, politically, it is time that global powers stop manipulating weaker nations for short-term national gains. In our globalized world of instant connectivity and deepening interdependence, a Symbiotic Realist approach is urgently needed. This calls for win-win gains and allows for non-conflictual competition.<sup>49</sup> For this to work, the UN system and other institutions of global governance need to be reformed to insure justice and dignity for all.<sup>50</sup> Major Powers also need to recognize that Just Power is the only sustainable form of power.<sup>51</sup>

On the domestic front, it is important for the countries of the region to improve their governance models and integrate dignity needs across all aspects of policy, as well as to take into account the emotional, amoral and egoistic traits of human nature. What I mean by dignity here is much more than the absence of humiliation. It is an inclusive set of nine needs that correspond to the three key defining elements of our nature. These are: *reason, security and human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness*. These are the central tenets of my thesis of Sustainable History.<sup>52</sup>

Technology and tradition come together in the Arab world.



Almost three decades ago, at the end of the Cold War, predictions of an “end of history,” defined by the victory of liberal democracy, gained widespread popularity. We know in hindsight that such forecasts turned out to be exceedingly optimistic. Liberal democracies, while they remain the most successful forms of governance thus far, do not resolve dignity deficits. Political freedoms empower people to vote, but do not prevent marginalization, alienation and the many other forms of discrimination, meaning that much more effort is needed for reforming democratic governance to insure inclusive policies.<sup>53</sup> Accountable and transparent governance that includes placing dignity at the heart of governance models is the only way ahead, and it is the most certain formula for Arab-Islamic countries to succeed in moving forward.

Each country needs to come up with its own formula for accountable governance that meets its cultural specificities (without cultural relativism) to be sustainable, secure and prosperous.

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