

## The Shifting Sands of State Power in the Middle East

In his commendably candid interview with *Time* in January 2010, President Barack Obama noted that managing politics in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict “is just really hard.”<sup>1</sup> The president, however, might well have been speaking about the Middle East as a whole. It is not just the Israeli–Palestinian track that has been difficult, so too have the Iranian and Syrian tracks, where engagement has not taken traction. Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Syria—nothing has been exactly easy for U.S. policymakers this past year. To be fair to the president, he has taken office at a time when the whole region is journeying into a new era. In a sense, the president is facing the consequences of three key events that took place in the region more than 20 years ago.

That the dynamics for change arising from this triumvirate of events should have culminated at the outset of Obama’s term is unfortunate. But the reality is that the strategic balance within the Middle East was already tipping. Change on several planes—at conventional state politics, economics, and within Islam—were already underway. The consequence of this is that the United States’ old allies in the “southern tier”—namely Egypt and Saudi Arabia—are likely to wield less influence in the future. The “northern tier”—which includes Turkey along with Iran, Qatar, Syria, and possibly Iraq and Lebanon—represents the nascent “axis of influence” for the coming regional era, barring war.

The prospective bitter struggle—already begun—over the future of the region, and over the shaping of Islam closely interconnected to the balance of power, will not see a region that becomes any “easier” for the United States to deal

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Copyright © 2010 Center for Strategic and International Studies  
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with. The question is whether or not the United States can accommodate some of the unfolding changes. As it remains obsessed with dissections of Israeli politics and bilateral relations, can it even recognize the broader regional changes? Will it adjust to them, or will the United States seek to inoculate itself by clinging to nation-state structures from the 1920s?

## **A New Era Opens**

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The last great Western intervention into the Middle East, from approximately 1821–1922, left behind a gaping void eventually filled by the colonial powers, Britain and France. But as leaders of the regional states and Islamist movements survey the coming era, they see no prospect of a repetition of this earlier experience. What they see is a gradual decrease in Western influence as the United States and its allies reduce their forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. For the first time in centuries, therefore, there will be no external powers stepping into any void. There will also be no Chinese or Russian intervention—at least not in the colonial sense of a massive political intervention. The realignment of trade, technology, and investment toward the East no doubt will continue its relentless creep, in line with the states’ “look East” policies. China and Russia will certainly play their part, but as partners not as powers.

This new era, therefore, is likely to be heralded by a fierce struggle for influence. Unlike the 1920s, it will not take the form of external powers jockeying between themselves, but it will be waged internally by the actors—state and non-state—for the future of the region. And it is likely to be a bitter one, both at the conventional political level and within Islam. The economic and social stresses of the coming years will call for new responses. The ability of states and Islamist movements to respond to these stresses, to find the Islamic harmonies through which to answer the sharp notes of popular emotion, and to find a visual language by which ordinary Muslims can imagine a new future and a way of living are the tests that lie ahead.

### **Roots of Today's Turmoil**

This shift to a new balance of power was sparked primarily by three political events almost 20 years ago: the implosion of the Soviet Union, the military defeat of Iraq in 1991 as the outcome of the first Persian Gulf War, and the overthrow of the Ben-Gurion doctrine in Israel in 1992. The doctrine, named after Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, held that it was impossible for Israel to make peace with its Arab neighbors because they would never agree to Israel’s presence. As a result, Ben-Gurion believed that Israel had no option but to ally itself with the region’s non-Arab periphery, namely Ethiopia, Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey. But combined with the end of

the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War, the internal politics within Israel changed as well, signaling a new direction for the whole region.

The implosion of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Iraq lifted the traditional constraints to Iran's influence. Iraq and the Soviet Union both, in their own separate fashions, had limited Iranian political ascendancy, but these restraints were now suddenly gone. More importantly, Iraq's defeat assured Iran's rise to become a preeminent regional power. It is not so much Iran's economic strength nor is it Iran's nuclear program that is the primary cause of the shift of power in the region. Rather it is Iran's conventional military arsenal—which combined with its regional allies including Syria, and groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah—has already begun to tip the balance, as Israeli officials acknowledge, by acting as a constraint to Israeli freedom of military action. An arc of missiles and rockets stretching from Gaza, south Lebanon, Syria, and as far as Iran, is a real deterrent to Israeli military action.

As Iran has risen, so has Turkey, potentially balancing the rising power of Tehran in the future. Ankara also realized its path of ascendancy as the Soviet Union collapsed and Iraq was defeated. Turkey had been the “wing” state of NATO for 44 years—at the Soviet Union's periphery, it was in charge of containing communism. Such a task had suited the Turkish elites of that era, but the end of the Cold War presented Turkey with the opportunity to emerge as a strategic power. The assertive Turkish secularism and militarism of the establishment elite was already being challenged by Islamist parties in the late 1990s. In the 2007 parliamentary and presidential elections, however, the challenge from Islamists seeking a more polyvalent society was faced down by the ruling AK Party, a moderately conservative party that advocates liberal economic policies. It was a key moment.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, the architect of Turkey's new stance and now its foreign minister, argued in his 2001 book, *Strategic Depth*, that Turkey no longer needed to be NATO's wing state. He argued that Turkey should be free to resume its earlier locus as a country at the center of continents.<sup>2</sup> In short, Turkey was casting off its earlier tight identification with U.S. policy, and looking past membership of the EU—albeit having left the door slightly ajar—to position itself at the pivotal point between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. In other words, Davutoğlu rightfully insisted that Turkey use its unique geography and history to its own advantage.

**Neither Iran's economy nor its nuclear program is the primary cause of Iran's rise.**

### **The Unwinding of the Oslo Process**

For the Israeli–Palestinian issue itself, the most important development was the Israeli Labour government’s 1992 decision to overthrow the hallowed Ben-Gurion foreign policy doctrine. The inversion of such a key doctrine had also been made possible by the defeat of Saddam Hussein. Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, had backed the “wrong” side in the war. As a result, Arafat was not only facing political bankruptcy, as the Gulf States collectively expressed their anger at his having sided with Saddam, but was also suffering a backlash from the nascent Hamas movement in Gaza. Arafat’s misfortune gave Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin the opportunity to strike while the iron was hot: Israel would now seek to make peace with its immediate Arab neighbors.

Rabin’s initiative may have been visionary, but it badly divided the Israeli electorate as never before, and it severely disenchanted Israel’s friends in the United States. The latter protested Rabin’s plan to sit with those whom they had been so recently vociferously demonizing as bent on Israel’s destruction. It

**T**urkey is positioning itself as the pivot between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

was from this juncture that Iran replaced its Arab neighbors as Israel’s “demon,” according to Trita Parsi, an American-Iranian author who focuses on Israeli-Iranian relations.<sup>3</sup> As significant as was Iran’s fall from grace in the United States, countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia saw their influence enhanced by the prospect of peace as Arafat and Rabin signed the Oslo Accords in 1993.

What many leaders in the region believe we are now seeing is the unraveling of Rabin’s initiative of nearly 20 years ago, as this gave way to an Israeli consensus that “land for peace” no longer answers the security needs of its people. Israelis perceive that neither their withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000 nor their withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 made them feel safer. They still feel threatened by rockets and missiles from both those places. In short, they believe those in Israel that tell them that further withdrawal will only bring the rockets closer to the main Israeli cities and population centers.

“Land for peace,” however, is the central pillar of the Oslo Accords. If that premise is no longer valid, and if withdrawal from the occupied land is no longer considered a viable option by a majority of Israelis, then the process has failed. But what has so bedevilled the Obama administration during its first year has been the collapse of the other two pillars of the process.

One pillar of the Oslo Accords had been that Israel’s settlement project was reversible: that occupied land could be returned to Palestinians on

which to build their state. Yet, when U.S. policymakers indicate that it was unrealistic for the United States to ever expect Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to be able to freeze settlement expansion, this is seen widely as confirmation that the settlement project has now become irreversible. In other words, it is understood to mean that, given Israeli skepticism on the land-for-peace clause, its changed electoral constituency, and the contingencies of coalition governments, no Israeli prime minister can aspire to reverse the settlements. In effect, they have become politically irreversible.

Another key Oslo premise was that a U.S. president could potentially “insist” or pressure Israel to withdraw from the land that it had occupied in 1967. This presumption of U.S. power was always dubious and based, for Europeans, on the notion of Israeli dependency on the United States. Israel, however, is not the Israel of the early years of Oslo. It has not only changed politically but also demographically. Whereas Israelis continue to hold their relationship with the United States as a high priority, their sense of absolute dependency on their U.S. ally has lessened.

### **Israel’s New Transcendent Outlook**

It is clear that Obama cannot impose any solution on an unwilling Israel, or even on an unwilling Palestinian people. It is just not possible to impose solutions when the underlying land-for-peace premise on which that solution is founded is simply no longer believed to offer either party a solution. More tellingly, in the last Israeli parliamentary election, not one party stood on a platform of peace with Palestinians—every party stood on a platform of “security for Israel.” The main point to begin to understand is that structural changes have transformed the attitudes of the Israeli electoral constituency. This is no mere temporary political shift and, therefore, is not contingent on which Israeli happens to be prime minister.

The unraveling of Oslo and the Rabin doctrine naturally weakens U.S. allies within the region, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, whose policies and internal security have been so closely tied to an Israeli–Palestinian solution. For the last nearly 20 years, these states have justified their alliance with the United States, and warded off internal dissent, on the receding prospects of the realization of a Palestinian state. Their leaders saw themselves inoculated from internal grievance and opposition, precisely because of their contribution to this process. Current changes have weakened their defenses from the internal voices of dissent that have plagued the leadership of both countries who are also facing succession crises as each decides on a new head of state.

The unraveling of the Rabin doctrine does not, of course, imply a return to the Ben-Gurion doctrine to reach beyond Arab neighbors. It is clear that it is no longer an option. Rather, the changes signal that if the Rabin doctrine is no

longer valid, then Israel's security must be tied to security within the shifting region, and hence in ensuring a regional milieu that is not threatening. How else can Israel survive? In short, now more than ever, Israel's fallback onto a "fortress" posture will require Israel to attempt to prevent or subvert any strategic regional threat. Israel needs a "peace narrative," or a public diplomacy campaign, to maintain the option of being able to maneuver. But the underlying regional dynamics suggest that Israel's true focus must shift to "engineering" a docile region, by force if necessary.

### **Syria's Regional Re-entry**

This then—the ascent of Iran as well as Turkey more or less at the expense of Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the unwinding of the Rabin doctrine—forms the background to Syria's re-entry into the mainstream of Arab politics as a key figure in a new regional alliance. Behind this rise lies a history that extends back to the Lebanese civil war of 1975. The then President Hafez al-Assad, current President Bashar al-Assad's late father, had witnessed the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood initiate its insurgency from the Lebanese city of Tripoli against the Syrian president as a member of the Alawite, a minority sect of Shi'ism. Tripoli, which formerly had been part of Syria, was closely linked by political and religious ties to the Syrian cities of Homs and Hama, in which a major uprising against Assad had erupted again in 1982. In the same year, Israel invaded Lebanon and attacked Syrian forces.

From a Syrian point of view, the overriding Israeli objective in invading Lebanon was not only to consolidate its position there, but also to realize the goal of its commander, Ariel Sharon, to bring about the fall of Assad in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood's forces in Syria were receiving their training in the radicalized atmospherics of north Lebanon, which is predominantly Sunni. They were being funded by pro-U.S. Arab states, who had been angered by Syria's earlier intervention in Lebanon. From Assad's perspective at this critical juncture in 1982—as the United States sided with Iraq in its war against Iran, as Lebanon fell under Israeli occupation, and as Jordan partnered with the United States and Israel—it seemed that Syria would be encircled by hostile Arab states that were not only allied to the United States but also sympathetic to the Israeli ambitions of undermining Assad.

At this point, he made a strategic alliance: he linked with his fellow Shi'a (albeit of a different sect) in Lebanon and with Ayatollah Sayyed Khomeini of Iran. This alliance was a key strategic success because it enabled the Shi'a movements in Lebanon to successfully resist Israeli and U.S. ambitions there. More importantly, Khomeini endorsed Assad's Islamic credentials as a legitimate Shi'a, and Iran refrained from criticizing his harsh suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency in Syria in 1982. Iran also provided key oil supplies to

Syria, which Saddam had cut. In short, Iran proved to be a critical ally in preserving Syria's survival in Hafez al-Assad's time.

In Bashar al-Assad's time, it has been this same alliance with Iran and the Shi'a of Lebanon that once again secured Lebanon from becoming a platform from which hostile action against Syria might be launched. Iran, alone among Middle Eastern states, stood with Syria when the latter came under pressure following the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri of Lebanon. In short, this 30-year alliance with Iran has proven to be a great deal more than a marriage of short-term convenience contracted in a moment of stress. Although it is not an ideological bond, it has stood the test of time. The Iranian relationship, therefore, remains central to Syria's history of needing to cope with its perennial vulnerability to the oscillation of Saudi and Egyptian attitudes toward Syria, and to the long-term U.S. policy supporting Israeli regional military dominance.

Bashar al-Assad's own strategic contribution to Syria, however, has been to recognize Turkey's aspiration to resume its traditional central position, both between East and West and within the Middle East. Underpinned by a cascade of trade and visa alleviation agreements, Syria has opened a window for Turkey into the Sunni Arab world that had effectively been closed since Kamal Ataturk's time. From a Syrian perspective, the Turkish strategic alliance with Syria, and by extension with Iran, added significance to what at times was felt by some Syrians to be a somewhat "airless" alliance with Iran. Turkish participation opened it out somewhat, and widened it, with its Sunni dimension. Bashar al-Assad's patient cultivation of a relationship with Turkey, and his and Iran's facilitation of Turkey's new role in the region, has significantly enhanced Turkey's own self-perception, chiming well with growing popular Islamic sentiment there too.

An Israeli consensus has emerged that "land for peace" no longer answers its security needs.

### **The New Northern Tier of Power**

The core members of this northern tier shared—and still do—a few common viewpoints that have made their new alignment even more feasible. First, they predicted that the U.S. invasion of Iraq would not prove to be a success, and would in fact generate wide instability throughout the Muslim world. Second, they were correct in assuming that the Iraq war would greatly impact their own Kurdish populations, eventually adding internal instability within each of the three states since each has a troubled history with its Kurds. And finally, all three believe that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict can only be resolved

comprehensively, and cannot be settled by ignoring key Palestinian and regional constituencies such as Hamas, other Palestinian resistance movements, and states such as Iran and Syria.

Despite these common political perspectives, the triumvirate was not conceived as a tight formal coalition, but as a shared portfolio of diverse interests in which its members might find common viewpoints on most “files,” but still have differing interests in others. Its basis, therefore, is pragmatic rather than ideological. It has both an economic interest—reductions of trade barriers and common travel area—and an energy dimension in the trans-Turkish Nabucco gas pipeline. This “broad-tent” pragmatic approach, which is characteristic of Bashar al-Assad, has allowed the northern tier to encompass others, such as Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar, and some North African states, into a broad coalition.

Behind the northern tier’s ascendancy in regional politics lies the perception that Syria and its allies have read the Middle Eastern ground better than the United States and its allies, especially since they—Iran, Syria, and Turkey—judged the Iraq war correctly from the perspective of the region, even though

Washington viewed Syrian and Turkish opposition to the invasion as an unhelpful stance. Syria and Iran are also seen to be standing in a pivotal position to shape the future of Iraq. More importantly, all three are seen to have read the prospects for a Palestinian state more accurately than others. Hence, they are in a better position, especially due to their links with

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**Syria has opened a window for Turkey into the Sunni Arab world.**

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Hamas and other Palestinian groups, to be able to craft a comprehensive regional solution and change the present circumstances for the better.

Iran, Syria, and Turkey are, therefore, widely seen to be the coming influence in this new regional era. Even Lebanon, the bell-weather of the region, has amply demonstrated the way the wind is blowing: one year ago, the March 14 political alliance was virulently hostile toward Syria. The March 14 movement was a pro-Western grouping of Lebanese parties, formed to mark the date of a massive popular demonstration held in Beirut after the assassination of Hariri, which called for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, a withdrawal that was eventually completed in 2005. Today, there is a steady stream of politicians from March 14 making the pilgrimage to Damascus. One example is Sa’ad Hariri, the current prime minister of Lebanon, who has visited Damascus and also announced plans to visit Tehran. Two years ago, this would have been inconceivable.



There will be those who will perceive this triumvirate as a hostile gesture toward the West. This is incorrect. The dynamics that brought it to fruition largely emerged from significant events a generation earlier. It is also an alignment whose deeper basis has been its very different reading of the region from that of the United States and its allies. Ultimately, the United States, as it digests the significance of the region's shifting strategic balance as well as the drift toward this "other" reading, may well conclude that its true interests lean more toward working with this emergent northern tier than by clinging to its hitherto exclusive reliance on the wobbling platform of U.S. traditional regional allies.

### **A Region Looking for New Socioeconomic Answers**

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A second aspect that will eventually draw European and U.S. attention is the brisk pace of trade liberalization and easing visa requirements that have accompanied the political vision of the northern tier. In one month alone in 2009, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, accompanied by nine ministers and an entourage of businessmen, signed no fewer than 48 memoranda in the fields of commerce, energy, environment, forestry, security, and water in Baghdad. This was followed by another 40 agreements signed with Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim of Syria, of which perhaps the most important was the removal of visas, allowing for a free flow of people across their common border. Subsequently, Turkish visa requirements for Lebanon were also lifted and a raft of bilateral trade agreements similarly concluded. In February 2010, more trade agreements between Syria and Iran were agreed upon, and again, visa requirements were lifted.

In short, the political vision of the northern tier is rapidly acquiring a commercial dimension. One key element is the proposed Nabucco gas pipeline, bringing gas from Azerbaijan to central Europe, and probably from the giant South Pars field in Iran through Turkey to Europe. If completed, it will offer central Europe the energy security it has long been seeking. The Nabucco network ultimately may include Iraqi gas, which would pass via Syria to Turkey. In this new decade, it seems that the politics of supplying natural gas to the Europeans are likely to eclipse the importance of traditional oil as the touchstone to Middle East politics, which makes a shifting center of gravity toward the northern tier even more likely.

### **Growing Economic Stress**

This emphasis on hectic economic activity, however, reflects another layer to the changes affecting the Middle East. Over the last ten years, news articles and television programs have focused on stock exchanges, and on the office and apartment blocks towering up around the region in cities such as Beirut, Cairo,

**Iran, Syria, and Turkey are widely seen to be the coming influence in this new regional era.**

and Dubai. As a result, it has given the region an aura of quiet, growing prosperity to overseas readers and viewers. Indeed, parts of most Arab major cities are changed and have become positively glossy with expensive high-rise apartments, restaurants, and boutiques. But this represents only one part of the full story.

Asset values, stocks, and real estate indeed did soar—until recently of course—

but the more significant story is that the share of income accruing to those who sell their labor for wages (in this region of 400 million) has been declining in real terms over the last decade. In short, the rise in wealth is not cascading down, but is in fact accumulating upwards, with wealth pooling at the very select top. A few in the middle classes may have jumped to the super rich, but many in the middle classes still struggle to keep afloat. The International Labour Organization (ILO) figures for Egypt, for example, show that while the index of average real gross domestic product (GDP) per person had gone up by 40 percent between 1980 and 2003, real wages nonetheless had declined.<sup>4</sup>

In short, with few exceptions, Iran being one,<sup>5</sup> there has been no trickle down of wealth to wage earners in the last decade. The 40 percent real GDP growth per head in Egypt has accrued overwhelmingly to the already wealthy super elite. More recent figures show nothing to mitigate this growing disparity. On the contrary, it has only worsened. In many states, the levels of absolute poverty, defined as family income under \$2 per day, are staggeringly high. In Egypt, it is estimated that 43 percent of the population live at or below this level, according to the figures assembled by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (official numbers are in the low twenties).<sup>6</sup>

It is, therefore, a story not only of declining real wages, but also of an increasingly migrant labor force, with all the attendant social erosion that patterns of migrant working entails. The economic and financial crisis that began in 2008 in the United States has had its impact here, but does not wholly explain the causes of stress. Some of these are inherent to the region. Over recent years, the region has imported most of its foodstuffs, rather than grow it, thereby exposing their consumers to the food price rises of Europe, which in turn have been compounded by exchange rate depreciations versus the Euro. Climate change has made its impact as well. Some 200–300 villages have had to be abandoned in northern Syria, since they no longer proved viable to support a population engaged in agriculture over the last two years.<sup>7</sup> More widely, the region is experiencing the consequences of reduced water flows in its major rivers.<sup>8</sup>

The extent of these levels of poverty is difficult to assess. Few available figures are regarded as reliable, but in a number of states, it is approaching, or has surpassed, half of the population. All states are experiencing social stresses and some should expect social unrest if the economic downturn is prolonged. The more pressing question is: how will the states deal with these developments?

### **Islamist Frustrations**

Underlying the economic and social stresses is widespread frustration. At times of social erosion and of severe economic stress, many will turn to religion for comfort. Clearly the Islamist movements stand best poised to accumulate the political support that this shift to Islam will entail. But there is a sting in the tail. Many of those who will be unable to find jobs in coming years will be the young. The World Bank estimates that 36 percent of the population in the Middle East and North Africa currently are younger than 15 years old.<sup>9</sup> Moderate Islamist movements believe that the jobless disaffected young males will gravitate toward the more radical and violent Islamist movements who offer the prospect of action to challenge injustice and privilege, though they have yet to be proven correct.

Islamist movements that followed the electoral route into parliamentary participation expect to be disadvantaged. They have been frustrated at being blocked in their efforts to change their societies by the authoritarian reaction and repression offered by their state apparatus. Whether in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, or Pakistan, the Islamist experience of participatory politics is seen at the grassroots level to have been an abject failure because it has brought no positive change. For example, Hamas convincingly won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006 but were prevented from assuming office by the Palestinian Authority, which was supported by the Americans, Europeans, and Israelis, who have sought to isolate and exclude the movement and to replace it unconstitutionally with its proxies. Now, the present Palestinian prime minister and cabinet enjoy no electoral or constitutional mandate.

Participation in electoral politics, therefore, has only served to discredit and de-legitimize the movements concerned. The Muslim youth increasingly are critical of movements, such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, for having compromised their legitimacy by participating in Western-style elections. Within and among a number of such movements, a debate has opened on the consequences of Western and Arab leaders' impediments to the electoral path to reform their societies. The debate on "what next" has been prompted by exactly such grass roots disgruntlement. The outcome to this debate, however, has not yet reached its conclusion. Yet, none of these movements can afford to be outflanked by the radically violent Islamist groups—which are crowding at the margins—when it comes to wooing the region's youth.

**If you cannot change the region, change the way you think about it.**

From where, then, is to come the vision for the future? The Arab elites in their own societies are preoccupied with making personal wealth. Few ordinary Muslims believe that the existing structures of government and its security forces serve anyone but the elite, and few in the underclass believe that their prospects will

improve without radical change. Yet, Islamic movements, in their present format, seem impotent to secure any real changes to society in the face of Western hostility.

This unanswered time bomb underlies wider fears that the region might “explode” like Europe did in 1912–1914 (which also faced similar social stresses) due to a small violent incident in Sarajevo. A similar incident in today’s Middle East might unleash forces and dynamics that movements and states alike might struggle to contain. It is in this context that a major shift is taking place: the vision of the West increasingly is no longer seen as adequate to the problems of the ordinary people of the region today. Existing structures have failed almost half the population. Many here are aware of these looming problems—problems associated with “change” that has been delayed for too long and is overdue.

It is against such concerns that Bashar al-Assad and Erdoğan have been so determined to inscribe an economic component to their burgeoning relationship. Yet, it is too early to say whether their efforts will be sufficient to defuse an explosive situation.

## **The Struggle for the Future of Islam**

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Yet, standing behind this question of an absence of vision is the wider issue of the future of Islam, which represents the third circle to the changes taking place in the region. It is also likely to be the site of a coming struggle among Islamic currents to answer the popular need for a fresh vision.

For the last 50 years, the West has acquiesced to the spread of the Saudi orientation of Islam in opposition to the revolutionary Islam of Shi’a Iran and that of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. But there does appear to be a greater appreciation in the West today of the Saudi orientation’s proclivity to fragment and fracture, thus migrating to a more dangerous and more violent form of Islam. Western caution toward this orientation known as Salafism (a reformist strand, which seeks to emulate closely the lives led in the earliest Muslim community) seem to be coming at the moment its fortunes are ebbing, but it is too early to be sure. While its appeal is declining in some areas, it can be seen growing stronger in the socially conservative areas of Egypt, and also creeping into Gaza.

What is more striking, however, is that much of the new thinking in Islam—whether it emanates from the Fethullah Gülen movement in Turkey or from Shi'a orientations linked to Qom, such as Hezbollah, or to the Sufi revival occurring in North Africa—is taking place outside of the traditional centers of Sunni Arab strength. This fact suggests that the repression of Islamism in the Arab “center,” combined with Western hostility toward it, has pushed the locus for the Islamist intellectual evolution out toward the periphery. Should the northern tier assume some political ascendancy in the region, it is not hard to see that the Shi'a orientation, together with the Turkish and other forms of Sufi Islam with which the tier is closely associated and which have a certain affinity among them, are likely to gain influence at the expense of literal, dogmatic, and intolerant Islam.

### **The Circles of Prospective Change**

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Plainly these three levels—the balance of power, the need for a fresh economic vision, and the shaping of the future of Islam—are all closely interlinked. Unless there is conflict in the region, in which case all aspects of the regional dynamics will need to be re-evaluated in light of its outcome, we may expect the shift in the balance of strength toward the northern tier to continue. It will find its articulation at the level of conventional Arab politics; at the economic level, particularly if the Nabucco project comes to fruition by supplying central Europe with a substantive proportion of its energy needs; and at the level of the Islamist revival, whose locus of intellectual drive has migrated from the Arab center to the regional periphery.

But what do these various “circles” of prospective change suggest to U.S. and other Western policymakers? It says that the region is going to get no “less” hard for them, as Obama complained to *Time*. It also suggests that change in some areas will be unsettling for the United States. Furthermore, it suggests the adage that if you cannot change the region, then change the way you think about it.

### **Notes**

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1. Barack Obama, interview by Joe Klein, *Time*, January 21, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1955072-6,00.html>.
2. Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası konumu (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position)* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları [Sphere Publications], 2001).
3. For more details on the Israeli-Iranian relationship, see Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance - The Secret Dealings of Iran, Israel and the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
4. International Labour Organization, “Economic Growth, Employment and Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Employment Working Paper* no. 19, 2008,

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5. Ibid. In Iran, the real gross domestic product per person employed grew by about 20 percent between 1990 and 2003, while the index of real wages grew by 13 percent between 1994 and 2001.
6. See “Egypt: Elections and Future of the Muslim Brotherhood,” STRATFOR Global Intelligence, April 11, 2008.
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8. See “Drought Blights Syrian Villages, Residents Dying of Hunger,” Environment News Service, January 27, 2010, <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jan2010/2010-01-27-01.html>.
9. Hichem Karoui, “Demographics of Africa and the Middle East Continue to Explode,” April 12, 2006, [http://www.spacedaily.com/reports/Demographics\\_Of\\_Africa\\_And\\_The\\_Middle\\_East\\_Continue\\_To\\_Explode.html](http://www.spacedaily.com/reports/Demographics_Of_Africa_And_The_Middle_East_Continue_To_Explode.html).