

# Security in a Fractured World: International Competition in an Age of Populism

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No doubt there are particularities to the Middle East, but the region is not so distinct as to be fully separate from contemporary global phenomena. Therefore, considerations of the wider context can shed important light on the matters before us. By this I mean that what we are witnessing in the region, while certainly distinctive, is also symptomatic of deeper tectonic shifts in the structures of governance worldwide. To phrase this proposition in disciplinary terms: let us envision stepping beyond the limits of an area-studies approach to the Middle East and instead treat the pertinent phenomena in a global and comparative context.

This hypothesis—that the Middle East is not only exceptional but also exemplary, not only singular but also symptomatic—becomes clear when we interrogate the key term in our gathering’s title, “dissolution.” It suggests a historical narrative, relying on an assumption that some order prevailed in the past, an order that may have once guaranteed security, but which however is now (for whatever reasons) is the process of dissolving. This is obviously a melancholy story of decline, from a model of stability in a golden age of the past to disorder in our entropic present.

Our analytic response to the perceived dissolution involves describing the present in an epigonic relationship to some previous order. Yet we should then give consideration to which order of the past serves as the implicit benchmark. If the world is dissolving before us, when do we imagine that it was whole? What is the reference point for the interlinear nostalgia? We might invoke the past coherence of pan-Arabism, but one could just well speak of the colonial order or even the Ottoman order. Alternatively, one could claim that it was the Cold War that provided stable points of orientation no longer available, hence the sense of dissolution.

While regional history evidently allows for multiple accounts of transition from order to disorder, this discourse of a transformative dissolution in the Middle East became particularly widespread, at the moment when ISIS was strongest and when it appeared to be at the point of erasing the Sykes-Picot borders. At that historical juncture, it became plausible to foresee the regional state system collapsing, hence the vision of disorder. Commentators predicted a wholesale redrawing of the map of the region. Yet now, at this late date in the war on ISIS, with its territorial expansion radically diminished, the once endangered international borders have reemerged and seem fairly firm. It does not appear likely that the geometry of nation states will dissolve very soon.

Yet it would be worthwhile to pursue a somewhat different and enhanced version of the dissolution thesis, by shifting attention from state borders dissolving to state substance eroding.

From this perspective, the unsettled character of Middle East politics turns out to be the local variant of the generalized dilution of sovereignty and traditional political institutions internationally. This line of thought takes us well beyond the specifics of area studies, as one recognizes a larger framing narrative of political modernity and its collapse. That modernity, the Westphalian paradigm of sovereign states, once spread around the globe; its formal expression remains the General Assembly of the United Nations with its suggestion that stable and independent nation states are the universal form of political power; and precisely this paradigm of sovereign states celebrated its victory as the so-called end of history in the wake of the opening of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only Francis Fukuyama imagined a Kantian regime of perpetual peace among nations as the Hegelian conclusion to all significant conflicts for humankind. Yet it is precisely that order, an array of sovereign states around the world, that is in question, and not only in the Middle East.

From that exciting moment nearly three decades ago, we can look back and trace the contours of dissolution, far beyond the Middle East region: September 11 in New York and Washington, and the war on terror that followed, with all its political cultural implications; the ambiguous trajectory of the European Union, first as a meta-national formation that might restrict national sovereignty, and now a site of dissolution between north and south, east and west; social disaggregation within China, pursuant to neoliberal acceleration, combined with expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea, let alone the Belt and Road initiative; and the aspirations of Russia to reassert itself in Sebastopol and Kiev as well as in Latakia, the various components of the Putinist effort to turn the clock back and, if you will, to dissolve the dissolution as which it regards the end of the Soviet era. We have moved from a historical moment in which a “new world order” seemed credible to one of increased conflict between powers and entropy within them.

Obviously, the Middle East plays a role in this global process, most dramatically in the events of 9/11 and its ramifications. In addition, the Iranian pursuit of regional hegemony has called into question the integrity of structures of sovereignty in several states, while amplifying that ambiguity in Tehran that Henry Kissinger once formulated as the need for Iran to decide whether it is a country or a cause, i.e. an international actor that respects others’ sovereignty or a force of revolutionary transformation. That transformational agenda contributes to regional dissolution.

There are furthermore multiple global factors that have disruptive effects, in the Middle East as elsewhere: new communication technologies and social media that allow for alternative networking while eroding the gate-keeping functions of traditional sources of informational authority; redefinitions of gender roles, both more progressive and more traditionalist; and a pending global shift away from that oil economy which during the second half of the twentieth century was vital to the stability of the Middle East state system. At stake is not only the transformation of the energy sector but, more broadly, a reconfiguration of political economy altogether, and all these elements contribute to a weakening of state sovereignty.

One can trace this transition from a quasi-Westphalian to our dissolutionist condition—from political modernity to political post-modernity, if you will—in symptomatic moments of American Middle East policy. The Gulf War of 1990-91 entailed an effort to roll back the Iraqi invasion in order to preserve the sovereignty of Kuwait, and it therefore operated within a

conventional framework of the nation-state system: the policy of liberating Kuwait was logically compatible with the decision to refrain from invading Iraq or, more controversially, the refusal to provide significant support for the domestic uprisings in Iraq beyond declarations of no-fly zones. In contrast, the War in Iraq of 2003, in part a response to intelligence reports about arms caches, the weapons of mass destruction, explicitly focused on regime change, as part of a declared democracy agenda, which was quite distinct from the paradigm of state sovereignty of a decade earlier. My point in recalling this history is not to relitigate either war but to underscore the stark contrast between the two in terms of their relationship to the nation-state system, the first committed to maintaining legitimacy, the second pursuing its transformation. The difference between the two is emblematic of the shift from a paradigm of international order to the condition of dissolution before us.

Despite the evident differences in the rhetorical registers of presidents Obama and Trump, their foreign policies display a certain continuity, a consistent distancing from an American role as the ultimate guardian of a world order, in the Middle East or elsewhere. In place of the internationalist conservatism of George H.W. Bush, Obama's inclination to reduce the American presence in the region gave expression to an isolationism from the left, while Trump's foreign policy veers toward an isolationism from the right. Those phrasings overstate each case, since neither policy meant complete disengagement, but each has placed greater weight on regional actors as alternatives to US action: Obama's tilt toward Iran has been rebalanced by Trump's renewals of ties to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, but limits on the scope of direct American involvement mean greater obligations for local political forces, political actors in the Levant and throughout the Middle East, to clarify their strategic goals and to take appropriate steps to reach them.

If I may summarize so far: the process of dissolution in the Middle East needs to be understood with regard to local terms and conditions, of course, but it is simultaneously part of a global transformation of the international order and the status of the paradigm of the sovereign state within it. American foreign policy plays a role in this, but so do other factors that are putting pressure on conventional assumptions about power and order. To talk about disorder in the Middle East we should not only clarify what past moment of order we take as a benchmark; we should also not ignore the international processes of entropy, to a large extent effects of globalization which has shifted power away from politics and toward economies, and therefore away from states and toward difficult to regulate market processes.

Globalization is however not only a matter of economics of course; it also involves population mobility, that can decenter the character of nation-state sovereignty. Large refugee populations put pressure on the stability of any state and national identity, both in terms of resource allocation and cultural self-understanding. What are the social consequences of major population shifts or the political responses to the apparent disappearance of national borders? Here I am thinking of, among other examples, the Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan but in Germany as well.

We should not forget the source of the Syrian refugee crisis. When Syrian President Assad declared bluntly in his speech of July 2015 that

”سوريا ليست لمن يسكن فيها او يحمل جنسيتها بل لمن يدافع عنها ويحميها“

'Syria is not for those who live in it or hold its nationality, but for those who defend and protect it'

he effectively nullified the fundamental law of national sovereignty, insofar as, for him, neither residence or nor citizenship provides legitimate grounds for a belonging to the political community of the state. One can only understand this as a declaration of ethnic, or if you prefer, sectarian cleansing. One need not look any further for a clearer declaration of dissolution. In the meantime, Syrian Law #10 effectively expropriates the homes of the refugees who will therefore have nowhere to return. The consequences of this process have been enormous, first of all for the refugees themselves, of course, but also the ripple effect across Europe. It is no exaggeration to say that the Syrian decision to generate refugee masses ultimately contributed to the Brexit vote and the subsequent destabilization of the European Union. It is not only the Middle East that faces dissolution.

We are currently in the midst of a transitional period out of a previous security regime associated with international organizations and the model of a liberal international order with a Kantian philosophical background. Whether one dates the origin of that paradigm from Westphalia in 1648, from 1945 or from 1989, the orientation toward a rational and perpetual peace has lost credibility as the necessary course of history, even if internationalist institutions and paradigms continue to circulate. Now however they face challenges from emerging alternatives, frequently reactions against globalization, in the form of populist movements, with their nationalist or even regionalist orientations. The driving forces are partially economic—globalization has always involved disruptions of older social relations and inequality in the distribution of wealth—and some of it is cultural, with complicated allegiances and identities. That formulation holds as much for Europe as it does for the Middle East, and it would be a possible point of discussion to compare the outcome of, for example, the elections in Italy with the recent elections here in Lebanon, in both of which the supporters of the traditional state lost to carriers of alternative identities and programs.

The obsolescence of internationalism and the rise of populism have implications for the prospects for security. To discuss this necessarily requires reflection on aspects of recent American policy decisions. While the assumptions of the past era will not disappear overnight, we have clearly entered a period characterized by pronounced adversariality among major powers, the United States, China and Russia, with each prepared to motivate policy choices in terms of respective national interest rather than, as was common not that long ago, in terms of world peace or an international order. To be sure, national interest was never absent during the previous period of principled internationalism, but there has been a clear shift of emphasis toward the priority of national interest.

This is the context in which one can begin to approach Trump's "America First" politics, which is anathema to internationalist ears but which should be evaluated in the context of Putin and Xi Jinping, which is to say, against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea and the Ukrainian crisis, as well as the build-up in the South China Sea and domestic repression, especially against the Uighurs. What does this new great power competition mean here, in the Middle East? A plethora of heterogeneous issues mark the region: the rebellion against the Assad regime, ISIS and its aspiration for a Caliphate, the Israel/Palestine conflict, the sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia, the war in Yemen and more. For world politics, however, the matter of primary significance remains Iran: because nuclear weapons are at stake and, especially for Washington, because since 1979 Tehran has never wavered in its call for "death to America." It cannot be surprising if Americans listen to that exhortation to murder and regard adherents to that slogan in Iran as well as their allies in other countries as enemies.

The JCPOA, the so-called Iran Deal, never achieved broad political support in the United States. The Obama administration failed to convince the public of its desirability, which is why it was never brought to the Senate, which has the constitutional duty to ratify international treaties. Without Senate ratification, the agreement remained merely an executive action, therefore susceptible to revocation by any subsequent administration. For us today, the pertinent question is what the security consequences of this development and the reinstatement of American sanctions will be.

The news of the American departure from JCPOA is still new, but I propose some considerations in conclusion:

- 1) Despite Trump's decision, the Iranian regime did not rush immediately to contravene the terms of the JCPOA precisely because it has been so advantageous for them. In addition, the regime may be being constrained as it faces an increasingly restive population. It may turn out that Trump will have been able to cancel US obligations without facing consequences from the Iranians. Of course the Iranians are threatening to return to nuclear activity, but that would likely irritate the Europeans and Russia. In either case, Iran loses.
- 2) Trump's firm position on Iran may strengthen regional political forces not dependent on Tehran. Consider the following sequence: The Lebanese elections on May 6 led to gains for the pro-Iran camp, even in Beirut. That was still prior to the news from Washington against the JCPOA. In the Iraqi elections on May 12, four days after Trump's decision, al-Sadr emerged as a winner,

certainly not a pro-American politician but also precisely not dependent on Iran. On the contrary he has built a bridge to Riyadh, that is, half way to Washington. This suggests some cracks in Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony. In the context of this conference, it is worth considering whether Beirut might achieve the same degree of latitude toward Tehran that Baghdad may be achieving. Security for Lebanon surely does not lie in becoming the staging ground for Iran's next proxy war on Israel. Lebanon was able to free itself from Syria. Can it similarly emancipate itself from the Iranian grip?

- 3) Iran has been able to establish a significant military presence in Syria. In the past weeks, Israel has undertaken attacks on those positions, diminishing Iranian assets directly (while Iran so far still hides behind its proxies to fight Israel indirectly). That conflict is not at all surprising; what is surprising however is the extent of Russian acquiescence in these strikes against its Iranian allies. Moscow may perceive that its own interests, including interests in the Middle East, are ultimately at odds with Iran; Iran's indelible anti-Americanism is not useful for Putin who still puts hope in an accommodation with Trump. No wonder Putin and Netanyahu communicate directly.

Whether this calculation will succeed is for the future to see. For us however the point is that regional security considerations have moved to this level of major powers, a world of adversarial competition rather than a rules-based order of the internationalist past. Stopping local dissolution is no longer only a local question but involves the interests of powerful outside actors, which is where the solution may lay. This politicization of security linked to a recognition of the interests of major states can potentially provide a corrective to the dissolutionist tendencies around us.