

From the Cold War to Caliphate: The Changing Strategic Environment in the Middle East

In 2016 a snapshot of the Middle East from the Levant to the Gulf would capture a region in the midst of a comprehensive upheaval. Neither the length of the transition nor the outcome of this transformation is predictable. What is clear is that for all the continuities in culture, religion and language, the region is in an unprecedented fluid state. On every level, state, regional politics and geopolitical context, the Middle East today bears little resemblance to the region before 2003. On the centenary of Sykes-Picot, little is left of that colonial construct.

In Robert Cooper's typology the Middle East has been sliding backward from the 'modern' to the 'pre-modern' world; from that of the territorial nation-state with borders, sovereignty and governmental capacity to a world of more local affiliations and competing elements of tribal or clan loyalties, armed groups, and little governmental capacity. People have begun to shift their loyalties back to more "compact communities."ⁱ In Max Weber's terms, few ME states now enjoy the prime attribute of the state, the legitimate monopoly of the means of violence.

Today regional actors, still principally states, are under siege. In every state, even the most resilient ones (Turkey, Egypt, Iran) society is divided as to the role of Islam in politics. Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen are in conditions of actual or virtual civil war, with Lebanon feeble and Jordan vulnerable. Non-state actors have moved into the vacuums: *Hezbollah*, *Badr* brigades, *Dae'sh*, *Jabhat al Nusra*, as well as some Kurdish groups, to mention a few. The civil wars have created serious refugee flows changing the face of the Middle East and putting special pressure on vulnerable states like Jordan and Lebanon. The current 'regional order' is under threat as some of these states unravel anarchically. *Jihadi* groups have now become territorially - based and compete with states. Welcome to the 'Afghan model'.

Regional politics are characterized by a heightened sectarian polarization between a Sunni and Shi'i camp engaging in proxy wars in Syria and Yemen and less overtly Iraq and Lebanon. This rivalry, which in fact reflects a power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, could lead to direct conflict and has taken on a zero-sum character that impedes any settlement of the bloody conflicts in Syria or Yemen. There is a risk

that states which have little interest in this bilateral feud, like Egypt or Turkey or even Pakistan will become involved. Regional alignments are in flux as Israel grows closer to the more activist GCC and Turkey mends its fences with Israel due to Russian pressure. Because of this rivalry and differing priorities (Egypt with terrorism and the Muslim brotherhood; Turkey with the PKK) there is little hope for a common front regionally against *Da'esh*.

Weak, fragile and broken states under challenge from non-state actors raises the question whether the current state-based regional order in the Middle East will survive, and if so, in what form. Even the stronger states Egypt, Turkey and Iran, more homogeneous and historic states with a strong cultural identity, remain deficient in governance, witness the existence of “deep states” in all of them.

And none of the states has satisfactorily answered the question of the appropriate role of Islam in politics.[Israel has an analogous problem]

Geopolitically the changes are marked as unipolarity has given way to non-polarity. Having hubristically overshoot in the earlier period, the US is now recalibrating its involvement in the region. It is now closer to being an “offshore balancer” than a “regional power” that characterized it in the period 2001-2009. This retrenchment reflects a political reluctance to get involved as much as a pivot to Asia or diminished interest due to the availability of shale oil. The net result is that in a period of turmoil the regional states do not have the alibi of an external power taking a leading role. Russia’s return to the region complicates calculations too; is it a ‘spoiler role’ vis vis the West, or a genuine tilt toward the Shi’i ? In the meantime the precipitous decline in oil prices (from \$100 to \$30 in three years) at once exacerbates regional rivalry and puts the states under pressure domestically.

Without external help and little sign of regional cooperation and real prospect of further conflict leading to more displacement, refugees and population movements, the region looks set to pose a continuing problem for the external power most directly concerned—the EU.

How did we get to this condition with an entire region in sustained turmoil ?

To understand the current situation we need to look back to what preceded it and the roots of the multiple crises besetting the region. For purposes of space/economy

and for maximum contrast I will do this by focusing on a few selected themes of continuing importance in 2016: governance; the political role of Islam; regional politics; terrorism, the evolution of war; and international politics and the role of external powers. Looking at the region since 1945 one is struck by two turning points, 1979 and a decade later the end of the Cold War. The former was much more important for the region's politics than the latter. A principal theme of this presentation/paper is the degree to which regional politics have been the product of local dynamics and forces and the marginal impact of outside powers, even in the Cold War and the decade of unipolarity following it.

Governance: Failure a distinguishing regional feature.

Almost all the woes of the region and the principal challenge facing it, stem from the failure to devise functioning and legitimate political systems. This implies systems that are accountable, representative, and inclusive with a capacity to deliver basic services.

In the 1950's with decolonization, military regimes took over and used the Cold War to gain arms and training. They instituted one-party systems and used foreign policy to keep their citizens mobilized. They gave privileges to special groups and mistreated minorities. Revolving military-led coups d'état prevented development of civil societies giving people a say in political decisions. Later this morphed into the security (*mukhabarat*) state eg .Libya, Iraq and Syria with more stable leadership favouring their own clans and treating the state's resources as '*ghanima*.' These security states were less military but equally repressive and politically dysfunctional.

These were largely secular, ostensibly nationalist states using the Palestine issue for outbidding regional rivals and maintaining states of emergencies. The left and the religious oppositions were kept at bay through repression. The 'return' of Islam after 1979 found these states unprepared. They were the principal casualties of the Arab spring with its demand for respect, accountability and effective government. The failure of Arab leaders to devise governments that took into account their citizens needs and wishes, left a legacy which we are now witnessing: societies polarized on the proper role of Islam in society; a discrediting of the secular

nationalist model; and unemployment in a largely youthful population which looks to migrate abroad. Divisions among the opposition and weakened states have opened up space for militant armed groups mainly Islamists to enter the political arena, often with foreign backing. The result varies from civil wars (Syria, Yemen Iraq) to frozen stalemated politics in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. The place of Islam in politics and what is an “Islamic model” are issues that were first raised in 1979 and persist.

The ‘return’ of Islam after 1979: What response?

The Islamic revolution in Iran is the single most important event in postwar Middle East politics. Islam was thrust into politics throughout the region and few states escaped its consequences which are still being felt today. Islam has pervaded the region, affecting regional relationships, the nature of terrorism today, the nature of the ‘resistance’ against Israel, conceptions of legitimacy and the nature of opponents of the existing regimes. From Saudi Arabia in 1979, Egypt in 1981, Syria in 1982 to Algeria in 1990 Islamists stormed the political barricades. Governments torn between repression and cooptation had to balance the risks of driving them into more militancy and underground or risk them capturing the state. Iraq, Libya and even Syria --once threatened-- adopted, with little success, a defensive Islamisation. to shore up their systems. From Saddam to Sisi regimes have sought to polish their Islamic credentials.

In alternating between coopting and confronting their Islamic oppositions, with mixed results, governments failed to deal with one source of their popularity. The basic services not provided by governments was increasingly energetically met by Islamic groups, dealing with natural disasters as well as food or medical shortagesⁱⁱ. The place of Islam in politics, the role of the Sharia raised issues about secular laws: who was its authoritative interpreter, the role of government and the legitimacy of the state itself. The slogan of Islamists in opposition to the state, “Islam is the solution” has not been vindicated as countries like Iran have proven more warning than model. Yet even avowedly secular states like Turkey have found it necessary for their identity to tilt back and rebalance culturally towards Islam.

As the secular, nationalist model of the security states singularly failed to deliver effective services to the citizenry, the search for alternatives fixed on what was familiar and authentic in language and symbol and which had been repressed, not democracy but Islam in all its vague and variegated meanings.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring (which the Iranians hopefully refer to as the 'Islamic awakening') societies in the region have demonstrated a continuing fundamental cleavage on the question of secularism vs Islamic (or religious) political systems. This is as true of Israel and Turkey as it is of Iran and Egypt. Injecting religion into political disputes such as the Palestine question made their resolution through compromise more difficult, and both Israel and the Palestinians did so after 1979. Opportunist groups like *Dae'sh* have sought to exploit these schisms and claimed to represent a modern caliphate, in the process underscoring the worst aspects of the region's politics by imitating the existing states in their predatory, arbitrary and repressive behaviour. In the case of ISIS violence against minorities is matched by its sectarian agenda; hardly an original or tempting model. At the same time there is no such thing as an enlightened pluralist Islamic model elsewhere. The Asian states (South and East) have regressed in recent years, providing *jihadists* and the target of *Da'esh*. In part this is due to the fueling of extremists by Saudi Arabia in its rivalry with Iran, the net result of which has been the "mainstreaming" of Salafism in Islam, from what used to be a narrow and very local base.

Regional politics: from structured to generalised rivalry

The postwar period of decolonization saw a focus on the Palestine issue as an Arab cause. This assumed centrality in regional politics even as the struggle for supremacy in the Arab world was played out in slogans of Arab Nationalism in the "Arab cold war." Unity schemes came and went, interventions took place (Yemen, Kuwait) punctuated by wars with Israel, intended and unintended (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973). Iran and the peninsula states were marginal players in all of this, though they were the object of Abd al- Nasir's wrath and campaign against monarchies.

This began to change in the 1970's with the demise of Nasir and the growth of oil wealth. By the end of the decade the Iranian revolution had created a new challenge: a large non-Arab Shi'i state in close proximity professing republican ideals, seeking Muslim leadership, accusing Saudi Arabia of "American Islam" and casting itself as the real source of "resistance" versus Israel. The sectarian origins of current problems in the region started with Iran's open support for Iraqi Shi'i, its instigation of a coup attempt in Bahrain and assassination attempt in Kuwait (1981/2) together with the beginning of a sustained involvement in Lebanon in 1982. Iran was now a major player in the Arab -Israel zone, with Syria its sole Arab ally in its eight year war (1980-88) with Iraq. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's Iran -Saudi rivalry was largely indirect with support of proxies on one side and on the other, cheque-book diplomacy underwriting *madrassahs* and mosques, promoting the Saudi brand of Islam throughout the Middle East and N. Africa, Pakistan and Afghanistan. National rivalry given Islamic and sectarian expression saw increased cases of attacks on Shi'i in some of the countries mentioned. Iran did not see sectarianism as a winning card and tried to promote itself as a Muslim not Shi'ite leader. ⁱⁱⁱFrom necessity though as a self-proclaimed defender of the "oppressed" it gravitated towards its natural constituency. Professing Muslim unity, Iran practiced division.

In the course of next decade attention shifted to the newly wealthy and unstable Gulf. The 1979 agreement between Israel and Egypt took the most important Arab state out of the picture rendering what had been the Arab-Israeli dispute once again, principally, into a Palestine-Israeli dispute. (Two intifidahs -1987, and 2000- testified to this, as did the absence of reference to the dispute in the subsequent Arab Spring). The upshot of all this was the linking of the Arab-Israel and Persian Gulf zones into one strategic theatre, with the Gulf states and Iran playing more important roles. And as the period after 2010 demonstrated, with the GCC and Saudi Arabia in the lead, a more assertive (some said 'impulsive') role region-wide. The US removal of Saddam Hussein in 2002 ushered in a new era in the region. Iran sought to establish a new strategic buffer in a newly Shi' i Iraq, while Saudi Arabia saw the creation of a new Shi'i state as a direct threat to the region. This same

perspective animated the Saudi view of politics in the region, in Bahrain (2011) and later in Syria where Iranian support for the status quo (Assad) was seen as deeply destabilizing and dangerous to the Sunni world. As the sectarian perspective on regional politics took hold, the scope of Iran-Saudi rivalry widened and intensified assuming a zero-sum character in which neither side could be the first to flinch or compromise. Yemen where the two states had cooperated in the era of the Shah and Nasir, now saw them on opposite sides. Rivalry extended to OPEC where Saudi determination to keep market share helped drive prices lower. Saudi Arabia acted more assertively regionally and sought to organize a coalition against Iran (including Turkey, Pakistan and Egypt) recognizing its interest in “internationalizing” the rivalry, it bumped up against the reality that the region was only *apparently* polarized: that there are cross-cutting interests and affiliations at play. The Sunni world is no more represented by Saudi Arabia than the Shi’is by Iran. Difference within each community, as well as the existence of secularists and nationalists, suggest other affiliations, possibly stronger than the merely or exclusively sectarian.

In addition the structure of the region with several large states must give any state aspiring to hegemony, pause. Turkey, Egypt or Iran the most plausible candidates (with Israel and Saudi Arabia not far behind) would quickly find the others arrayed against them. Two other points need to be made about the evolution of regional politics. The regional states in the Arab-Israel zone and the Gulf have demonstrated little capacity to manage their own affairs, let alone conflicts. There is no record of peacemaking or farsighted diplomacy regionally. These states have become addicted to external interventions to save them. Related to this is the fact that the regional states since 1945 have not –*in the main*– had the experience of major war among themselves. Where wars *have* occurred they have cleared up misunderstandings and pretensions: most Arab states now recognize there is no military solution to the Palestine issue. Among the Arabs and with Iran there has been no comparable experience or learning process (with the exception of Iraq vis a vis Iran). Hence the Saudis and Iranians do not agree on the power hierarchy (or pecking order), which they dispute, and so far have not tested directly. Wars clear

up these things but they are (today) a less and less an acceptable way of doing so. So the two states and especially the Saudis continue to harbour fantasies about their relative status and power. A large part of the blame for this must accrue to the West led by the US. They have indulged the kingdom to an unimaginable extent so that it acts like a spoilt child.

(Consider the Saudi encouragement of a US strike on Iran and then the kingdom's petulance about the nuclear agreement. Take another case: King Abdullah's letter to Bush threatening to "reassess" relations with the US. The letter of August 2001 came at the height of unipolarity a month before 14 Saudis were implicated in 9/11).

The US' soft glove treatment of Saudi Arabia --as with Israel-- has distorted regional politics for the worse. Facing the region at it is might lead to greater realism in both cases.

External powers: necessary and nuisance?

In the immediate postwar, decolonization, period the US and USSR appeared as new actors in the region. Although they saw the world in terms of their bipolar competition, the regional states saw the world through their *own* priorities. The superpowers saw each clash of arms between their protégés as bearing on their credibility and linked to the global rivalry of the two blocs. This led to the ever-present risk of local wars escalating to a nuclear confrontation and nuclear threats were indeed made in 1956 and 1973. Yet the striking thing in retrospect, at least, is how *little* influence the superpower patrons had, despite their arms deliveries and alliances. Time and again they were defied by their weak allies: the nationalization of oil and the oil embargos; interventions (Nasir in Yemen and Israel in Lebanon)the initiation of conflicts by Israel in 1967 and 1982 (against the PLO in Beirut) and Egypt in 1973; by their unwillingness to accept the terms insisted upon by the superpowers, eg Israel re. settlements and the high price attached to any steps taken for peace, or for opening up their nuclear programme..

Far from significantly influencing or controlling regional politics the superpowers reacted to events, often with incomprehension.

One feature of this period was the superpower tendency to defer to their 'strong men' ('our son of a bitch') as easier to do business with. This had the effect of

reinforcing the authoritarian tendencies of local rulers. Unforgivable ignorance on the part of external powers also caused long-term damage to the region, eg. the US in Iraq in 2002-2004. Worse than 'regime change' was the single-minded focus on the sectarian nature of the country, a self-fulfilling assumption which ensured the sectarian fissure would become permanent.

In the Gulf the longstanding British presence kept the region at peace until their withdrawal in 1971. The US decision to rely on regional powers to maintain order (twin pillars) while maintaining a presence 'over the horizon' was shortlived: the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war ended it. By the 1990 in light of Iraq's attack against Kuwait, the US decided to create a permanent presence in the region, a naval component of which became the Fifth fleet and control of which came under a new Central Command. "Dual containment" ended the US offshore presence and made it with some 30,000 troops in the region, a regional player. Coinciding with the decade of unipolarity, the US decision was not contested. It led in time to US over-confidence and over-reaching from containment to regime change in Iraq, with its attendant repercussions. Arguably the attack on Iraq and the stalemate that followed it also ended the era of unipolarity.

Russia's return and China's entry to the Middle East gives local states an apparent point of leverage vis a vis the US. And it is its rivalry with the US that animates Russia in the region, not some strategic imperative in Syria.^{iv}

These events form the roots of the current era and have lessons for us.

1/ Even in the Cold War US/USSR influence was limited and at the mercy of regional events. It was regional dynamics that shaped the Middle East not the global structure. This is still true from the local origins of the Arab Spring to the origins of Iran-Saudi rivalry.

2/ The regional players left to themselves were not able to perform much better. Twin pillars collapsed as a result of the Iranian revolution. The Iran-Iraq war stemmed from local issues and the role of the superpowers even if they had wanted otherwise, would still have remained marginal.

3/ The priorities and even interests of the regional and external powers are rarely identical though they *may* overlap at times. Consider Israel and the US over the past

fifty years. Or Saudi Arabia and the US today: Riyadh is focused on Iran and Washington on *Da'esh*.

While regional factors and dynamics animate events, the influence of external powers is limited and the record of regional conflict management is no more reassuring.

War: from conventional to civil.

One of the reasons for the decline in external power influence is found in the politics of the region. As inter-state conventional war has declined and with it the threat of major warfare, the utility of arms and arms supplies have receded as well. Of course arms relationships remain important as both Iran and Iraq would attest from bitter experience. The relationship between the US and Israel, which includes guaranteeing that state's "qualitative edge" militarily, is a prerequisite for reassuring Israel and hence getting it to even *consider* concessions.

That said as the threat of a major war with an Arab coalition has faded and with it any existential threat to Israel, the leverage of US arms has been reduced. Yet put another way as "strategic depth" has been shrunk by missiles, territory becomes less important and anti-missile technology becomes *more* important. So arms supplies *still* remain important, for the GCC and Israel despite the changing face of war in the region. (Indeed hi-tech arms like anti-missile systems make *some* arms sales *more* important).

There have been no major wars in the Arab-Israel zone since 1973. The wars that have occurred since, the *intifidahs*, and the wars in Lebanon and Gaza, have been relatively limited affairs. Israel has found it hard to translate its formidable military machine into decisive results: repeated 'mowing of the grass' reflects the elusiveness of definitive victory. Hybrid or asymmetric wars have replaced conventional wars, reducing the importance of many components of conventional capability. Or blocking their utilization by denial of access. Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 and the Iraqi insurgency amply demonstrated this. And the current civil war and operations against *Da'esh* confirm it. On the ground intelligence, drone strikes and special ops actions can 'degrade' the foe but can they produce desired

outcomes? US commentators today talk of 'shaping the environment' a very different proposition from that expected from "shock and awe".

Military power remains of limited utility where the issues are principally those of nation-building, governance and political legitimacy. This has been amply demonstrated in both Iraq and Afghanistan, where deficiencies in political systems have made insurgencies and extremism possible and long-lived.

The GCC states and especially Saudi Arabia over the years have spent hundreds of billions of dollars on arms. The stalemate in the Yemen suggests limited yields from this investment. The arms relationship with the US, UK and France are a form of reassurance and a bond to the military-industrial complex in these countries. Yet as President Obama has noted, the major threat these countries face is internal.^v

Civil wars are the most cruel and most resistant to settlement absent a clear victor. The phenomenon of "too weak, too strong" prevails in which the parties are too weak to win and too strong to lose, thus ensuring as in Syria continued mayhem, dislocation and death. Changing facts on the battlefield (as the Russians are doing) may increase one party's bargaining power but does little to settle the differences.

Terrorism: in whose name?

Until 1979 terrorism in the Middle East was secular, nationalist and in the service of political/ territorial goals. The various terrorist groups after decolonization were Palestinian and often funded by governments. Some groups were used as proxies against other Arab governments but they were largely used against Israel. The injection of Islam into the politics of the region and into the 'resistance' against Israel, changed this. In 1982/3 the first cases of suicide bombings occurred against Israeli and US/French targets.

At the same time the mujaheddin in Afghanistan welcomed volunteers for jihad against the USSR. Many of these became (in Olivier Roy's phrase) the 'nomadic *jihadis*' in the 1990's flitting from one cause to another: Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq. The first generation jihadis represented by *Al Qaida* and finding fertile ground everywhere in its franchises, concentrated on foreign targets (far enemy) not Muslim ones. Though violent there was more symbolism than bloodlust in their operations.

The Sunni uprising against Baghdad and the US provided the recruits for the next generation of *jihadis* first under Zargawi and later under Baghdadi as it morphed into *Da'esh*. This group in competition with *Al Qaida* (and on a different plane, Hamas in Gaza) targeted both the 'near' and 'far' enemies, was utterly ruthless using the violence of the deed and the social media to maximum effect. It was also relentlessly brutal toward other Muslims and avowedly sectarian. The fact that governments had broken down made it easier to pursue its other distinguishing characteristic: its goal of setting up a caliphate in utter disregard of existing state borders. In this it represented more an insurgency, seizing territory rather than merely seeking to weaken its foes.

Foreign jihadis, many from Europe, flocked to its banner, less, it should be emphasized due to any "Islamic message" it might have, but rather to its brazen extremism and radicalism. As Roy, Farhad Khosrowkavar and others have noted the radicalization of these recruits sometimes converts, *preceded* their Islamicization. Once radicalized *Da'esh's* brand of extremism appealed as the 'only game in town.' Governments concerned about their citizens returning radicalized from Syria should focus on why they were radicalized enough to go to Syria; (bombing *Da'esh* is good theatre but does not address the underlying problem). The temptation to use terrorists for state ends persists though the advent of *Da'esh* underlines the threat they pose to states and the state system. Saudi Arabia sees *Da'esh* as a greater threat to its sworn foe---Iran---than to itself. Simultaneously Saudi Arabia, which can be outflanked by *Da'esh* as a radical Sunni movement, knows that group is a potential competitor. With both *Da'esh* and *Al Qaida* present on the Arabian peninsula, whatever threat Iran poses (and it is not a military one) pales into insignificance.

Summary

The security state has been replaced by the contested state; ("moustaches by beards"?) top-down by bottom-up. The failure to create viable, legitimate and effective states is the cause of the present turmoil and the most important single challenge facing the region. The Arab Spring represents the political awakening of the citizenry and their demands -though inchoate- represents a new step in the

region's political evolution. 'The street' in future will be heard. The place of Islam in politics is salient in every state, is disputed, and is critical for any prospective national unity government.

Regional politics neither bound by the Cold or the Arab Cold War, nor centred on the Arab-Israeli dispute, now features several cross-currents: sectarian rivalries; power struggles between states (Iran/Saudi) and their attendant proxy wars; low key inter-Arab rivalries, and competition among terrorist groups. The area from the Gulf to the Mediterranean now constitutes one inter-active strategic theatre, with multiple players and chessboards.

There is no tradition, experience- practice or system for managing regional affairs locally. Jealousies have prevented the creation of a regional security forum in the Gulf, for example. Starting in the mid-1970's Saudi Arabia has been insistent that Iran and Iraq be excluded from any such arrangement, which rather negates the point of the exercise.

As inter-state conventional wars have declined they have been replaced by asymmetric and civil wars where the state is enfeebled and challenged. This reduces the advantages of traditional militaries (and outside powers), giving militias and governments' pursuing guerrilla war strategies more leeway. Terrorism has become a threat to regional governments rather than their instrument (Remember state-sponsored terrorism"?) It has evolved from being secular and national to 'religious' and jihadist unattached to any national cause. In the process it has become 'de-culturated' and increasingly bloody for its own sake.

Outside powers, especially the US which increased its involvement considerably after 1990 and despite retaining considerable military infrastructure, now look like marginal players in the politics of the region. Yet external powers and especially the EU are now **more** directly affected by developments in the region. Whether due to conflict, instability or simple unemployment, migration to Europe poses sensitive moral and political/social questions for their governments and peoples alike.^{vi}

Conclusions

The Middle East today bears little resemblance to what it was in the 1950's or 1980's: actors, stakes, regional interactions and external power interests have all

changed. The role of non-Arab states of the region is greater. The geopolitics of oil is still important but less so. The US never had “control of the region” (to which some nostalgically and inaccurately refer)^{vii} The dangers of instability now stem not from superpower confrontation or around supply interruptions, but of rolling instability into Europe via migration and jihadi terrorism. Dealing with this is much more difficult than maintaining reserve oil stocks, or deterring aggression by predatory states. The irony is that Europe in any case now has more interests at stake in the region while having less influence.

The single most important factor in stabilizing the region, the creation of legitimate (representative, inclusive, accountable) and effective governments, resembles nation-building, which is not in the gift of any external power. The most these can do is to help promote civil society in those states searching for solutions; prod and nudge regional states into greater responsibility and restraint in their regional interactions and ambitions and reassure those truly vulnerable states about assistance in the case of blatant aggression whether from neighbours or militant groups like *Da'esh*.

The future of sectarian conflict depends largely on Iran-Saudi relations but also on how domestic politics in the region evolve. Regimes have stoked up the issue for internal political advantage (consider Maleki) to substitute for effective government. Finding dependable ‘moderates’ to support in Syria for example is difficult and the risks of ‘blowback’ in the case of sophisticated arms, has to be considered. ‘Boots on the ground’ transforms the issue from a local one and risks escalation, without assuring results. Removing Assad has to be managed to ensure that the resulting void or ‘free for all’, does not open the door to *Da'esh*.

Stemming the movement of *jihadis* from Europe into the region and improving societal resilience in Europe should be priorities. Humanitarian, economic assistance and cultural contacts should be increased. And there should be a more energetic prodding of all regional actors into a peace process. Posing as ‘security manager’, ‘partner’ and a merchant of arms is a sorry role for great power.

What must be avoided is giving some regional states carte blanche to act with the assurance there will be no price to pay. (Israel and Saudi Arabia come to mind).

Moving “offshore” as it were, to a secondary role in the region, is desirable not because outside powers lack military power or will (i.e staying power). It is due simply to the fact that most of the problems of the region are not susceptible to military power or arms supplies.

Increased Western involvement over the past half century has distorted regional relations.^{viii} Making these states assume responsibility for their region is the beginning of making them answerable and mature as opposed to ‘free-loading’ states. Almost contiguous to Europe, it is time for the region to assume responsibility for its own tumultuous destiny. In any case it is no longer possible for others to do so.

Shahram Chubin January 2016

ⁱ Robert Cooper “The Post Modern State and World Order” London: Demos, 1996 and The Breaking of Nations (London: Atlantic Books,) 2003.

ⁱⁱ “The uprisings of 2010 that toppled regimes in the so-called Arab Spring were as much a cry for services as for democracy.” Thus *The Economist* , “Aiwa (yes)minister” November 14, 2015 p.33

ⁱⁱⁱ There are five Sunnis for every three Shi’i in the Middle East. There are Shi’i majority in only Iran, Bahrain and Iraq (&Azerbaijan) with significant minorities in Lebanon and Syria.

^{iv} Sam Jones, Erika Solomon & Kathrin Hille, “Vladimir Putin asked Bashar al-Assad to step down” *The Financial Times* January 22, 2016

^v Thomas Friedman “Iran and the Obama Doctrine” *International New York Times* April 5, 2015.

^{vi} In the ME, 60% of the population are under 25. Youth unemployment is 25-30%. (In Iran 20 million are between 25-35, which equals 50% of the electorate.) Youthful unemployed will look toward Europe where the birthrate is stagnant and greying. The ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors are self-evident and the latter can only be intensified in the event of continued conflicts or governments that fail to perform economically for their citizens.

^{vii} Gideon Richman “Preserving American Power” *The National Interest* Jan/Feb. 2016 (No.141) p.18. It may have been to this type of inaccurate representation of the past that President. Obama was referring when he observed: “America is famously ahistorical..” See “A Conversation in Iowa, Part 2” *The New York Review of Books* November 19, 2015.

viii External powers encounter with the region has left its scars on them. Consider the US since 9/11: suspicious of foreigners and obsessed by the possibility of terrorism, far less hospitable and generous in its treatment of refugees(2500 Syrians)and a less attractive society on many levels. As one French statesmen said after 9/11 on the US reaction: "The magic has gone."