

## SHADES OF YESTERYEAR: IS THE MIDDLE EAST ON THE PATH TO REGIONAL WAR?

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### *Abstract*

*Is the Middle East on a path to regional war? One hundred years after the conclusion of World War I, many of the same factors the preceded wars in Europe seem to be in place in the region today: increased arms sales, social and political unrest, and increasing conscription. This paper examines the similarities and differences between the Middle East today and the Europe of 1914. It also analyzes key variables to develop scenarios that could lead to peace or war in the region.*

*Keywords: Middle East, causes of war, scenario planning*

The Middle East today is at its most turbulent since the 1990–91 Kuwait Crisis. The region is in such upheaval that it hearkens back to the period before World War I, when turmoil in Europe erupted into a cataclysm of industrialized warfare involving mass armies and widespread destruction. The Middle East today is not at that stage, but under what conditions could such a nightmare play out in the region?

### Shades of Yesteryear

It is worth mentioning the similarities that today's Middle East bears to the Europe of 1914. In the years leading up to 1914, European countries engaged in a substantial arms race, marked

especially by the great naval race between Germany and the United Kingdom. In the last ten years, military spending has increased dramatically in the Middle East, due in part to Iraq rebuilding its military after the US withdrawal, and then fighting *da'esh* (ISIS), but also to an increase in spending in the Gulf (SIPRI, 2016).

Europe before 1914 was also a region of social and political unrest, with separatist movements and challenges to the social order across the region, from open rebellion in Russia and the Balkans to widespread labor unrest in Western Europe. It goes without saying that similar patterns have emerged in the last ten years in the Middle East, with the American occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan; the unrest of the Arab Spring; a standoff between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE; and ongoing violent clashes from Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt to Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. These conflicts, thankfully, have so far not merged into a single regional conflict, but the trends are worrisome, with pervasive sectarianism, a rekindling of tensions between Europe and Russia, between Iran and its Arab neighbors across the Gulf, and between Israelis and Palestinians.

Another telling similarity between Europe in 1914 and the Middle East today is the use of universal male conscription in Egypt, Syria, Iran, and the UAE and an increase in ideological sentiment throughout the region. Taken separately, these two trends are fairly innocuous. Powerful nationalist sentiment can promote loyalty and cohesion in society, but blind loyalty, coupled with the means to send hundreds of thousands of men into battle, contributed to the shock of World War I in Europe. It also

contributed to the tension of the Cold War, when millions of soldiers, many of them conscripted, faced off across the plains of Central Europe. Groups like *da'esh* employed blind-faith ideology to mobilize thousands to their cause, and ongoing efforts to reassert government control over media and information in the Middle East, after initially losing ground at the beginning of the information age, has the potential to give states a similar mobilizing power. None of Europe's leaders in 1914 expected the catastrophe that ensued, but once the battle was joined they could not easily back down, nor could they keep from putting more and more men under arms, demonizing the enemy and whipping up popular anger to mobilize support for war. A regional conflict on that scale has not broken out in the Middle East yet, but the conditions exist that make it possible: reinvigorated arms races after the so called American pivot to Asia, widespread social tension, and conscription with ideological fervor.

### Some Differences

But there are also important dissimilarities between the Middle East today and Europe in 1914. In particular, players outside the region, like the United States, Europe, and Russia have tried to limit their investment in the outcome of conflicts in the Middle East. In general, they have not committed the level of resources that would make the outcome of any sub-regional conflict, such as those in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, a foregone conclusion. This resistance to being pulled in fully to these conflicts gives external players the flexibility to play a balancing or

stabilizing role, something that Europe in 1914 did not enjoy. Then, the Ottoman Empire was crumbling and China and Japan were too far away to influence the outcome of events in Europe. Perhaps the Middle East today will avoid the fate of Europe in 1914 because the United States, Europe, and Russia still have the opportunity to exert a peaceful influence on the players involved.

Like these external players, none of the states in the Middle East seems ready to attempt a rewrite of the regional map, as Germany seemed prepared to do a hundred years ago. Even calls for the break-up of Iraq seem to have subsided, especially since the *da'esh* pariah openly ignored borders. Most states in the region today are trying to restore international borders, not undermine them. One wild card is the Kurds, a nationalist movement that spans four states and that is not regarded as a pariah, at least not by the US. If the Kurds overcome disagreements among the different elements of the movement, and make a claim to statehood that is not roundly condemned, especially by the US, then the regional map would be threatened. Another wild card is Yemen, where political breakup into two Yemens is once again a real possibility.

Perhaps the most important difference between the Middle East today and Europe in 1914, however, is the alliance structure. Prior to World War I, mutual defense agreements, both secret and public, essentially dictated who would be on which side of any large-scale conflict. Most European countries chose a side. So far, this is only partially true in the Middle East. Sunni Arab states appear firmly committed to stopping the rise of Iranian influence

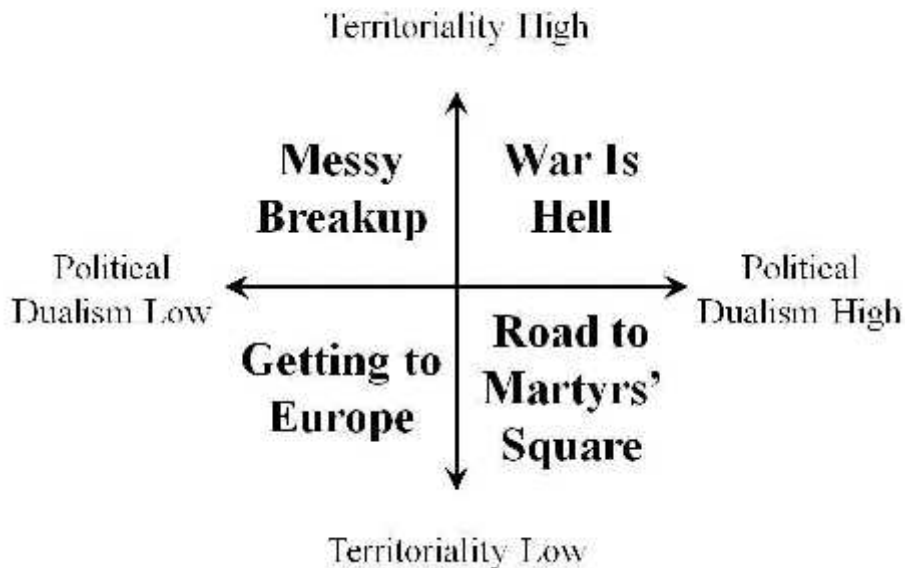
in the region, and many states are fighting to contain, and hopefully eliminate, *da'esh*, but the network of alliances is bewilderingly unclear beyond that. Israel and Turkey have focused on defending their perceived interests on their own, and the lack of coherence in the Kurdish nationalist movement keeps other countries from having to choose clear winners and losers. This proliferation of frenemies might actually contribute to avoiding a regional cataclysm.

### Some Forecasts

What might transform the bevy of small-scale military stalemates that characterize Middle East security today into a full-blown regional war on the scale of, heaven forbid, World War I? Conditions like persistent arms races, widespread social tension, and conscription with ideological fervor seem to cast a shadow of 1914 over the Middle East, but external players can still exercise a stabilizing influence, regional states have so far avoided redrawing the map, and alliance patterns are unclear. If things continue as they are, then a multiplicity of small-scale conflicts, with ambiguous outcomes, could be the shape of things to come, at least in the near-term. While this would hardly be a happy state of affairs, it would certainly be preferable to a region-wide war.

Perhaps understanding how security in the Middle East could worsen would help us understand how it could improve. As a heuristic device for illustrating possible futures, I use scenario planning techniques outlined by Peter Schwartz (1996) in *The Art of the Long View*. Schwartz' method uses two critical variables to

identify scenarios that could unfold (see figure 1). Given the analysis above, two variables seem likely to have a disproportionate impact on future security of the Middle East: territoriality and political dualism. Territoriality refers to the stakes attached to territory in Middle East conflicts. So far, with the exception of the conflict in Syria, controlling territory has generally been of tactical, not strategic, significance in the post-Arab Spring conflicts. In Yemen, fighting centers on how much influence Iran has in the country; gaining a few more square kilometers of territory would be less significant for the Saudi-led coalition than agreeing to a deal that kept Iranian influence off the peninsula. If the Kurds make a play for statehood, or if a state in the region tries to annex the territory of another state, then it would dramatically raise the implications of territoriality and change the dynamic of security in the region, possibly precipitating a regional war.

**Figure 1. Four Possible Futures for the Middle East**

The second variable, political dualism, refers to the extent that players inside and outside the region view security questions in black-and-white, good-and-evil terms. This with-us-or-against-us approach to political discourse reduces debate to a question of loyalty and limits policy options, with a concomitant increase in the stakes of failure. So far, some trends point in a dualistic direction, while others point in a pluralistic one. In Libya, two sides are engaged in a rancorous military stalemate, but they are still negotiating in fits and starts. The conflict in Yemen is often cast in dualistic terms, but a non-military solution appears possible. Still, leaders in Egypt, Syria, and Turkey have painted most opposition with a broad brush of terrorism, which could have the unintended effect of making failure more costly to political leaders, not less.

Figure 1 outlines how these variables could determine what the future holds for the Middle East. In the most frightening

scenario, “War Is Hell”, a series of ongoing sub-regional wars morphs into one consolidated, regional war, with two clear sides and extremely high stakes, as occurred in Europe a hundred years ago. This scenario would result if political discourse increasingly casts security challenges in good-versus-evil terms (political dualism high) and if territory itself acquires strategic stakes (territoriality high). In this scenario, political leaders would mobilize all the resources of society to defeat the enemy, and lifetimes’ worth of blood and treasure would spill onto the battlefield, probably over the future of Yemen, Syria, and Kurdistan.

Two somewhat less frightening scenarios are “Road to Martyrs’ Square” and “Messy Break-up”. “Road to Martyrs’ Square” refers to the excellent book by Anne Marie Oliver and Paul F. Steinberg (2006), *Road to Martyrs’ Square: A Journey into the World of the Suicide Bomber*. This scenario would result if territoriality reduces in importance, for example, if *Da’esh* territorial control is eliminated and no other player makes a bid to claim territory (territoriality low). In “Road to Martyrs’ Square”, political dualism becomes more salient, with conflicts increasingly cast in good-versus-evil terms. In this scenario, suicide terrorism would increase in frequency and, possibly, scale, not only in Europe but in the Middle East as well, as terrorist organizations try to replicate and outdo the notoriety gained by *Da’esh*. Increasing political dualism will do nothing to eradicate the idea of radical violent extremism.



In the “Messy Break-up” scenario, political discourse becomes more pluralistic (dualism low) and territoriality increases in importance, possibly as a result of a claim to Kurdish statehood or the fracturing of Yemen, or both. This scenario would entail violence, but not on the scale of “War Is Hell” or with the terrifying randomness of “Road to Martyrs’ Square”. In this scenario, players external to the regional might negotiate a stable territorial solution while regional players not directly involved focus on security and building political institutions at home. Alternatively, external players may be unable to negotiate or guarantee a reasonable territorial solution, but the conflict would essentially be contained. In this scenario, radical extremism might have less of a draw because governments in the Middle East would provide populations with outlets for peaceful dissent and allow the creation of civil society institutions.

In the final scenario, “Getting to Europe”, political leaders will have made security discourse pluralistic and maintained the stability of internationally-recognized borders. The “Europe” that the Middle East gets to, in this case, is not the Europe of 2015, awash in refugees and haunted by suicide terrorism, but the Europe of 1995, riding the wave of the post-Cold War peace dividend and regional integration. In this scenario, the Kurds do not get a state, but they might garner significant levels of peaceful autonomy, while the Yemen war would end peacefully and Palestinians and Israelis might integrate into one state where all have equal citizenship rights. Perhaps most importantly, this is the

only scenario that looks somewhat better than the current reality in the region.

#### Final Observations

If “Getting to Europe” seems far-fetched, then we should hope it is at least as far-fetched as “War Is Hell”. The Middle East has surprised us in the past, in both positive and negative ways, so it behooves us to consider the conditions under which security in the region could get better or worse. It seems unlikely that the current state of affairs can continue indefinitely. Something has to give. The question is whether leaders in the region can navigate the storms of territoriality and political dualism. One worries that the Middle East will have to go to hell before getting to Europe.

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