

Policy Report

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Security in an Unstable World

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to place the current security issues in the Middle East in a global context and to do so in terms of the next three decades. Over that time span there are likely to be four main determinants of global peace and conflict.

Socio-economic Divisions

The globalised and largely unrestricted free market economy of recent decades has resulted in impressive economic growth across much of the world, not just in the countries of the Atlantic community but most notably in South and East Asia, where growth rates in some countries have been exceeding 7% per annum.

At the same time, the current world economic system has been singularly unsuccessful in enabling a fair distribution of the fruits of that growth. Instead, a remarkable division has evolved between around one fifth of the world's population that has done impressively well over the past forty years and the majority that has been largely excluded from the effects of economic success. The very large 'elite' is not concentrated in any one country, even if the majority is in the Atlantic countries and East Asia. Of the 1.1 billion people among the elite perhaps a third are in China, India and countries such as Brazil, but the majorities in such countries are increasingly marginalised.

The extent of the division is remarkable, quite apart from the 'super-elite' (for the first time, the 2007 *Fortune 500* list of the rich-

est Americans were all dollar billionaires) – according to the UN’s WIDER Institute in Helsinki, the richest 10% of the world’s population has amassed 85% of household wealth and the poorest 50% have just 1%. This socio-economic divide has evolved over several decades and there are no indications of a narrowing of the gap.

Education and Communications

At the same time, perhaps the most impressive progress in human development of the past forty years has been the improvement in education across the majority world. A far higher proportion of the marginalised majority of the world’s people now receives at least four years of primary education, literacy rates are far higher and the improvements in education and literacy are at last being enjoyed by girls as well as boys. There have also been major changes in communications, not least with radio and television. The ‘data poor’ aspect of the digital revolution may still be with us, but even that is being redressed by the wider use of the web.

All of these changes are to be welcomed as some of the most significant aspects of human progress, but they also involve a marked increase in the awareness of marginalisation by the majority of the world’s people. During the 1970s, western economic growth was said to embody a ‘revolution of rising expectations’ as people looked towards the consumer benefits of expanding economies. Now, the more likely

result of the failure of the global economy to ensure socio-economic justice is a potential ‘revolution of frustrated expectations’.

In China, for example, the impressive but hugely unbalanced economic growth of the coastal cities has been accompanied by many thousands of examples of social unrest including riots and other violent demonstrations, especially in the towns and cities of provincial and rural China where the majority of the population still live. India has seen remarkable economic growth in recent years but it has also seen, against all expectations, the renaissance of the Naxalite neo-Maoist movement, which now affects more than one third of all of the states of the country. Much of the support for the al-Qaida movement comes from marginalised young men across the Middle East, South West Asia and overseas diasporas who may be quite well educated and not in dire poverty yet who see themselves as thoroughly and persistently marginalised.

Environmental Constraints

There are no signs that the trends towards socio-economic divisions are easing, and these divisions are likely to be exacerbated by the impact of environmental constraints. One form of constraint is the location of some of the world’s key resources, notably oil and natural gas, in very restricted parts of the world, the most notable example being the concentration of close to two-thirds of the world’s oil reserves in the countries around the Persian Gulf, but other global issues have come to be recognised as having even greater importance.

In the late twentieth century, the world-wide human community began to have an impact on the entire global ecosystem – the biosphere – for the first time in history. Before then there had been major local and regional effects stemming from such phenomena as atmospheric and water pollution, land dereliction or depletion of marine fisheries, but none had had a global impact.

The first example of such an impact came in the early 1980s with the recognition that a small group of chemicals, the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), were degrading the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere that protects living organisms on the earth's surface by filtering out excessive ultra-violet radiation from the sun. The potential destruction of the ozone layer was recognised as a matter of great urgency and in a remarkable example of international cooperation the 1987 Montreal Convention was agreed that resulted in the phasing out of the use of CFCs.

The complete removal of CFCs will take many years and their impact on the ozone layer is persistent over decades, but it is unlikely that the destruction of the ozone layer will get any worse and the layer will ultimately recover. This is something of a success story but was made easy by the limited range of chemicals that were responsible and, in particular, by the ease with which they could be replaced.

This does not apply to the much greater example of a global human impact, progressive climate change due primarily to the emission of carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels. There is now a broad international consensus that climate

change is by far the most important environmental problem for the 21st century and that urgent action is required to prevent catastrophic change. This is made more urgent, and links in with socio-economic divisions, by a recognition that it is likely to have a profound effect on those parts of the world which have the greatest incidence of poverty and disempowerment.

Until about 15 years ago, most climate change research tended to show

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that the temperate regions would be those parts of the world most affected by climate change. Britain, for example, would get warmer and windier, with northern and western parts getting wetter and the south and east getting drier. If the main impact of climate change was in the northern and southern temperate latitudes, then at least it would affect countries that had the economic resources to adapt. There was a belief that the tropical and sub-tropical regions would be ‘buffered’ by natural processes from the impact of human-

induced climate change, just as they had been buffered and therefore largely unaffected by prehistoric examples of natural climate change.

By the mid-1990s, this relatively hopeful prognosis had largely changed and it became recognised that those regions would be greatly affected in three ways. One would be rising sea levels affecting many of the large coastal cities of the south and also the low-lying but very fertile river deltas such as the Ganges/ Brahmaputra. A second would be a pronounced increase in the intensity of tropical storms, especially typhoons hitting densely-populated land masses and causing numerous casualties and catastrophic damage.

The third and most damaging aspect of climate change would be major changes in the distribution of rainfall, with many areas subject to long-term drought. Given that the tropical and sub-tropical land masses are home to most of the world's people and provide the agricultural systems that feed them, there is the potential for huge problems of food scarcity.

All of these issues of tropical and sub-tropical climate change will affect societies least able to cope with the consequences and will interact with the enduring problem of socio-economic marginalisation. Unless these trends are altered, especially the 'drying-out' of tropical and sub-tropical land masses, it would be wise to expect an era of intense migratory pressures at a level far higher than those currently due to economic difference, coupled with a more intense evolution of radical and extreme social movements as a minority of people on the educated margins

respond to their predicament.

The Security Paradigm

The final issue is that the current western security paradigm is essentially short-term and concentrates primarily on maintaining the security of the countries of the North Atlantic and their international interests. It is state- and alliance-centred and does not extend to addressing the underlying issues of marginalisation and environmental constraints. It has been appropriately termed 'liddism' – keeping the lid on security problems and seeking to maintain control within a status quo, rather than addressing the problems at root. While the recent proposals on responding to climate change are welcome, they are not remotely sufficient to reverse current trends. There has been some progress on the issue of debt relief but virtually none on trade reform or on development strategies designed to foster sustainable and gendered development.

The Middle East Context

All of the major issues so far discussed have a particular resonance for the Middle East. The wealth/poverty divide is particularly marked in the countries with large populations – from Morocco through to Egypt and Iran and extending beyond to south-west Asia, especially Pakistan - and there is marked exclusion even in essentially wealthy states such as Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the relatively high birth rates in a number of countries means that there

is currently a large cohort of young people coming out of education with little prospect of gainful employment.

At the same time, the region has witnessed an impressive growth in communications, especially in 24-hour satellite news channels such as Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera, with these giving a robust and more independent coverage of domestic and international issues. It has also seen a substantial increase in other forms of communication including the web, broadband and mobile phones, making it substantially easier for radical movements to spread their messages.

On the issue of climate change, the prognosis for the region is particularly negative, with predictions of substantial decreases in rainfall in an environment in which there are already intense pressures on water resources.

There is, furthermore, a specific issue of resource constraint stemming from international trends in oil resource location and use. The countries around the Persian Gulf, especially Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, collectively have over 60% of all the world's remaining proved reserves of high quality oil, with much of the rest in Russia, Kazakhstan and Venezuela. At the same time, Western Europe, Japan and India are all heavily dependent on imported oil. Even more significant has been the increasing oil import dependency of the United States and China. The US now imports about 60% of all the oil it needs, with this set to rise still further as its domestic reserves are depleted (US reserves are currently about a quarter of those of Iraq). China was self-sufficient in

oil until 1993 but will need to import half of all its massively increasing requirements within two years.

The maintenance of its interests in the Persian Gulf region has been a singular feature of US security policy for well over fifty years, and has been marked by such developments as the creation of the Joint Rapid Deployment Task Force in the later 1970s, its enhancement into US Central Command in the mid-1980s, the vigorous campaign to evict a

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previous ally, Iraq, from Kuwait in 1991, a sustained programme of arms sales and military cooperation in the region and the recent re-designation of the US Fifth Fleet as the guardian of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea.

In its conduct of the ‘war on terror’, the United States has pursued radical Islamist groups with remarkable vigour but to little effect. The al-Qaida movement is much more active in the 2000s than it was in the 1990s prior to 9/11, there are enduring conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and there has been a substantial

increase in anti-Americanism across much of society in the region, at least outside the narrow confines of ruling elites. The al-Qaida movement envisages its short-term aims against its near and far enemies (regional elites and the western alliance respectively) in terms of decades, and its long term aim of establishing a new Caliphate over an even longer time scale. The United States and its western allies regard the security of the Persian Gulf oil reserves as essential to their economic well-being over several decades. The region therefore faces the prospect of a long period of instability and conflict, but this is likely to be exacerbated by the socio-economic divide and the consequences of climate change.

that in any other part of the world. If such a paradigm shift could be achieved it would be of great benefit to the region. If applied world-wide it might do much to ensure a more stable and peaceful international system in the coming decades.

Conclusion

On present trends the Middle East region might best be regarded as that part of the world that is most likely to experience the adverse consequences of current failures to face up to the core world trends discussed earlier. It may also be the region most likely to benefit from any major re-thinking of the western security paradigm that might be rooted in sustainable security, embedding the concepts of human and common security in a paradigm that looks to long-term conflict prevention.

Given the failure of the current 'control' paradigm as applied to the region – two wars, 150,000+ civilian deaths, well over 120,000 people detained without trial, and deep-rooted antagonism to foreign occupation – there is an urgency for re-thinking security that transcends



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