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THE CONSOLIDATION OF A NEW ARAB POLITICAL ORDER

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While the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm against the Yemeni Houthis and their allies continues and its long-term results are so far unknown, it is not pre-mature to project that a new Arab political order is being consolidated. Its elements include a firm and sustainable commitment to fight extremism and sectarianism, bring order and stability to the heart of the Arab world – namely, Syria and Iraq – and design, chart, and lead an independent course for the protection of pan-Arab national interests.

Such an order has a leader in the collective energies and capabilities of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, with Saudi Arabia as a first among equals, and essential assistance from such countries as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. Indeed, to assure its collective interests, arrive at a hoped-for peaceful stability, and sustain much needed political, economic, and social development, the Arab world must coalesce around a strong political order that can utilize its capacities and permissible international conditions to achieve what it needs and deserves. Importantly, the consolidated new Arab political order appears to emphasize essential principles that require astute judgment, committed resources, and continuous vigilance.



Operation Decisive Storm Coalition Forces' spokesman Saudi Brigadier General Ahmed Asiri provides a briefing on developments in the campaign. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

Fighting Extremism and Sectarianism

The status quo states of the new Arab order are cognizant of the threats represented by the plethora of extremist groups operating at the heart of the Arab world. In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has staked a claim in Hadramawt Province abutting the Saudi Arabian border after it lost its bases in Shabwa and Abyan to the west. In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State group has erased the borders between the two countries in a mission to re-establish an imagined and borderless Islamic Caliphate while al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front controls strategic areas of Syria. Both organizations are serious threats to Lebanon and its pluralist political society.

In Libya, the Islamic State group, al-Qaeda affiliated Ansar ash-Shari'a, and a sundry of militias have settled, and promise to both keep the country unstable and use it as a base to spread chaos and mayhem elsewhere. In Tunisia and Egypt, jihadist extremists are waging a war of attrition against state security institutions. The actors of the consolidating Arab political order must know full well that they alone can address this threat in a fashion that combines a sense of shared responsibility for common interests and an attempt at forging an independent course that serves such interests.

Concomitantly, the new Arab order sees that what sectarian hatreds, apprehensions, and threats

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exist in today's Middle East will fester if they are not addressed actively, rationally, and resolutely. While sectarianism has unfortunately always been part and parcel of Arab and Middle Eastern history, it has lately become a defining factor in the innumerable rifts besetting Arab and Middle Eastern states. From Sunni-Shiite divisions exacerbated daily by the ongoing Syrian slaughter and Iranian-supported Shiite militias in Iraq and Yemen, to abhorrent policies and behavior toward both Iraqi Muslims and minorities exhibited by the Islamic State group, to threats against the Levant's Christians, to other manifestations, sectarianism threatens to become the basis for the complete collapse of established authority. What the new political order has already succeeded in, however, has been to become an equal-opportunity fighter of sectarian forces by, first, participating proactively against the Sunni Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria and, second, declaring war

on Shiite-Houthi usurpers of legitimate authority in Yemen.

Bringing Order, Fixing Syria and Iraq

Nothing is as anathema to the struggle against extremism and sectarianism as disorder and the continuing killing in senseless wars to preserve authoritarianism. While the so-called Arab Spring was needed to infuse popular input into governing and challenge exclusivist political systems in the Arab world, conditions in its aftermath made it a symbol of chaos, disorder, and drift that invited instability and now threaten the current state system. At no other time has the Arab political order witnessed such utter disarray and loss of direction as it did following the heyday of the protests that began in Tunisia at the end of 2010. And at no better time than the present does the Arab world need to find a modicum of stability that can pave the way for gradual change to occur. By the same token, at no better time does the Arab world need a new and hopefully rationalized political order that, in Weberian fashion, would permit an overarching authority – dare we say hegemon? – to be established and strengthened.

Bringing order to the Arab system will necessarily require an end to the Syrian and Iraqi anomalies where elements of extremism and sectarianism, authoritarian brutality, exclusionary politics, outside interference, and humanitarian tragedy have coalesced. As the Yemen operation proceeds to restore legitimate political authority and stanch the project of an overly-ambitious local militia, arguably the greatest challenge facing the new political order is how to arrest the bleeding ulcers of Syria and Iraq without exacerbating the challenges of bringing order and the uncertainties of facing the Islamic Republic of Iran, the decisive actor in both countries.

Perhaps the proposed Arab Joint Force that was discussed at the latest Arab Summit in Sharm al-Shaikh, Egypt, can serve as a potential military instrument for order; albeit its composition, funding, and mandate require rational analysis, understanding, and a large dose of modesty given the challenges ahead. Similarly, what might help the important decision to address the Syrian and Iraqi cases is the American acceptance – as voiced recently by the new U.S. Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter – of the Arab world's playing a responsible role in resolving problems of extremism and instability.

More Independence in Deciding Pan-Arab Interests

No new Arab political order is worth the effort if it does not emphasize the principle of independent Arab political action and act to safeguard it. Indeed, the regional and international environments make this both essential and permissible. First, Arabs have since the rise and development of their states, and specifically since the 1950s, seen themselves on the sidelines in very important pan-Arab national security matters. Their domestic realities of weak state institutions, economic troubles, failed state-controlled development, or authoritarian government, among others, necessitated a reliance on major external powers to help face existential and other challenges. Subsequently, their decision-making regarding their interests had to contend with the

interests, goals, and agendas of external actors, the latest of whom is the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain.

Second, despite the challenges still facing the charting and sustaining of an independent political and strategic course, internal conditions in strong Arab states and the fraying of relations with important international actors give hope that the new political order possesses an opportunity to be a leader of an Arab renaissance of sorts. Gulf Cooperation Council countries have become sure players in many international issues, especially economic – the establishment of the G-20, for instance – and have the confidence and clarity to remain leaders in regional and global affairs.



Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud departs the March 2015 Arab League summit in Sharm El-Sheikh with Yemen's President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

Additionally, while the United States has not abdicated its old responsibilities to be an important part of Arab strategic calculations, especially in the Arabian Gulf, there is a general

feeling of either an American fatigue about commitments overseas or simple nonchalance about the fortunes of old allies. Similarly, French, British, Russian, Chinese, or other replacements are simply not forthcoming or even capable of filling the void. It thus is up to stable and strong Arab states to take up the mantle of leading a new order that emphasizes freedom of action and independence of endeavor; of course without severing ties with the United States that continues to be the largest supplier of the military hardware necessary for leadership.

Forget-Me-Not Palestine

Much has been said about the absence of the urgency of the question of Palestine from Arab political discourse since the second intifada of 2000. The attacks of September 11, 2001, the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions and their aftermaths, and the rise of the Iranian nuclear program as a dominant international issue are also said to have helped divert Arab and American attention from pursuing a resolution to the now 67-year old tragedy. Today, such pressing issues as the Islamic State group, Iranian interference in Arab affairs, and the post-Arab Spring uncertainties are added as ingredients for a recipe to forget the premier Arab cause.

But the reality is that redressing the Palestine injustice remains the Arab world's worry, hope, and constant endeavor, notwithstanding the difficulties. In fact, the Arab "busyness" with Palestine and the plight of the Palestinians is now accompanied by a renewed sense of Palestinian self-help, independence of action, and confidence. Aided by the Arab world's material and political support,

the Palestinian Authority is closer than ever to achieving its statehood in the international arena, despite continued Israeli occupation and dispossession of land and people. Palestine as an entity is recognized by scores of governments, international organizations, and parliamentary bodies. It has also just been admitted to the International Criminal Court where it – a state without an independent territory – will be able to bring cases against Israeli officials responsible for killing innocents during Israel's military actions against unarmed civilians.



Riyad H. Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, addresses the Security Council after a draft resolution submitted by Jordan on the establishment of "a sovereign, contiguous and viable State of Palestine" failed in December 2014. Photo: United Nations.

What the new consolidated Arab order can do – now that it is asserting its independence of action and protection of pan-Arab interests – is give more power to Palestinian political institutions to work toward re-configuring intra-Palestinian affairs to serve necessary unity and coherence.

Internationally, it can assist in more forcefully representing Palestinian grievances and rights and in not so much re-producing as in continuously re-emphasizing the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 as the most viable and acceptable political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israeli conflicts. Palestine remains too precious and important to deserve any less attention, dedication, and commitment.

New strategic orders usually come with innumerable responsibilities and exorbitant costs that only strong states and political systems can afford to bear. It appears that a rational decision has finally been made to arrest the drift that afflicted the post-2011 Arab world and helped to sprout extremism, sectarianism, disorder, disunity, and weakness. The next few years promise to bring interesting developments as the leaders of the new Arab political order get organized around essential principles to promote, safeguard, and sustain pan-Arab strategic interests.

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