A Choice between ISIS and Sisi?

The Arab World in 2016

True to the term, the Arab Spring of 2011 brought to life a multitude of hitherto dormant forces, that have acted sometimes in concert, but more often than not have been in conflict with each other. The Arab world has not least witnessed violent backlashes from the dominant forces of the preceding decades-long winter.

To make any sense of the current situation in the Middle East and North Africa, it is important to understand that what we are witnessing is the simultaneous playing out of multiple layers of conflicts, unfolding according to their own separate logic and dynamic, yet interacting in complex ways:

- Popular protests and uprisings against authoritarian and corrupt regimes
- Conflicts between ethnic and sectarian groups
- Conflicts between regional powers
- The conflicting interference of world powers external to the region
- The “Global War on Terror”

The present brief discusses these layers and makes a few policy recommendations in relation to the resulting complex reality in the region.

No Sisi Quick Fix to Complex Conflicts

First, what started it all: the uprisings against the authoritarian and increasingly corrupt regimes that had dominated the region for many decades. This struggle has faced tremendous setbacks, from the bloody counter-revolution in Egypt to the drawn-out civil war in Syria which has killed hundreds of thousands and driven nearly half the population away from their homes. Yet the forces for change have not gone away. Indeed the very harshness of the repression in places like Egypt points to the
fact that especially among the youth the will to quietly resign oneself to the tyranny of
the power elites has not returned. Every indication is that as soon as the pressure
from war or security force repression abates, the youth return to the streets with
the same demands.

Secondly, as the revolts shook the
regimes, by the same token they opened up
unresolved tensions between ethnic and
religious groups, and between different
regions and cities. These tensions have been
kept under a lid by the regimes’ blocking of
independent popular organisation and
political action. Like with the fall of the
Soviet Union, the weakening, crumbling or
topping of authoritarian regimes now bring
these tensions out into the open. In one
sense, protests by minority groups are
actually part of the general rebellion against
authoritarianism. Just like the revolutionary
mood brings forth calls for workers’ rights
and freedom of expression, it also brings
forth the grievances of ethnic or religious
groups, and of regions that have felt
discriminated against. Yet, while the general
calls of protesters for democracy, freedom
and social justice will always encounter the
resistance of the power elites, in the case of
the demands from ethnic or religious
groups, they also may typically face the
opposition of other parallel groups, who
feel their position or their own aspirations
are threatened by these demands.

Thirdly, over time it is not only local
regimes that have been shaken. For
decades, a slow process has been at work,
where the grip of global powers established
by the end of World War I has loosened bit
by bit. This situation is the background for
an emerging rivalry between regional
powers for economic, political and military
influence. The turbulence in the wake of the
Arab Spring, and the breakdown of state
power in several states, has created a
partial power vacuum that the rivalling
powers most notably Iran, Saudi Arabia and
Turkey (Egypt for the time being mostly
absorbed in its internal troubles) compete
to fill.

Fourthly, another layer of conflict is
added, as global powers - moving according
to shifting assessments of their own
strategic and economic interests - intervene
to support one or another of the parties
pitted against each other locally. This is
most obvious in the Syrian conflict, but, in
more subtle ways, it is at work across the
region.

Fifthly, while intertwined with the
other layers of conflict, and often
instrumentalised by actors in them, the so-
called “war on terror” is not reducible to
them. The Western effort to weaken or
destroy the terrorist organisations and
networks certainly has a dynamic of its own,
which is indeed why it has been possible for
authoritarian incumbent rulers in the
Middle East to use this for their own
purposes.

Have the initially promising
movements for reform now, as a result of
these interacting factors, degenerated into
general chaos, where religious extremists
are fighting authoritarian governments,
ethnic groups and local clans in a free-for-all
devoid of promise, only serving to dissolve
existing state structures into anarchy? And
should the priority for Western
governments therefore be to help re-
establish stability and territorial control,
even if the only way to do so now is to
support the strongest military force around,
which in most cases happens to be the
incumbent regime?

Such a conclusion, in some form, is certainly on the table in many Western circles these days, and is happily promoted by Arab power elites. Yet it does stand up to careful analysis. What triggered the current instability in the first place was popular resentment against the regimes in place. How viable then, is the idea that helping those same regimes reassert full control would be beneficial, even with the limited goal of creating stability? The answer may not be as straightforward as it would seem. History does show up examples of authoritarian rulers who have established a stable rule, often with very harsh means, and are then able to preside over rapid economic development. Yet so far there is nothing to suggest that in the Arab countries, either the incumbent leaders, like Asad, or new leaders brought forth by counter-revolution, like Sisi, have come up with a serious new programme of economic reform. It would seem, in all likelihood, that if the pre-2011 elites continue in, or are brought back to power, they will continue to produce more corruption, more brutal oppression, more stalled development, and ever widening economic gaps.

Furthermore, the situation in the decades leading up to 2011 produced the social forces and the ideological trends that came to challenge the power elites through the uprisings. Despite the weakness of economic development the Arab economies did grow, even in per capita terms. As a result, the resources available also grew for important segments of the population. Not least central here is the expansion of education, which produced an ever-growing educated middle class. In its turn, the growing educated elite did not fail to develop expectations of, and eventually demands for, the right to participate in decision making. Despite the dramatic backlashes, it would be hard to argue that any of these factors have gone away. The educated elite continues to expand, the information revolution can only be held back temporarily, and the younger generation have not reverted to blind obedience, but have, if anything, lost the little trust they might have had in the authorities. In this situation, efforts to prolong the rule of the incumbent regimes, or worse, to reinstate those who have fallen, promises prolonged chaos, and hardly stability.

For the incumbent regimes, the good enemy is the jihadists, and the more extreme the better. These extremists are easy to isolate from the population at large, and they serve the regimes well in galvanising the support of the US and the West in general. A most powerful tool is to put the terrorist label on the main forces of opposition within civil society. This has been applied with particular vigour towards the main Islamist groups in the region.

Indeed, understanding the continued centrality of Islamism in its various hues is key to understanding the developing situation. From the research undertaken by our group, as well as others, it emerges that still, today, Islamism is the dominant trend in the civil societies in the Middle East region. A reminder of some further research findings is in place.

Firstly, Islamism is not a reaction against modernity, but rather the main ideological expression of the emergence of an ever-growing educated modern middle class.

Secondly, as such, mainstream
Islamism represents, in many aspects, an urge for economic development, rationalisation of public administration and a more representative form of government.

Thirdly, Islamism is, at the same time, an identity movement pitting Islam against Western influence, and thus remains conservative on a number of moral issues and on gender relations. What then of the Islamists’ attitude towards questions of freedom and democracy? For decades the main Islamist movements of the Middle East have been calling for democratic reform in their respective countries. Combine this with their relative strength in terms of both organisation and following, and it was only logical that they were at the forefront of the protest movements in 2011, and that they were the main beneficiaries of the free elections that took place in a number of countries in the wake of the Arab Spring. What then of the evidence of their behaviour in office? The two main cases here are Tunisia and Egypt. In Tunisia, the Islamist Nahda party that headed the government from December 2011 to January 2014, showed its commitment to democracy by voluntarily giving up its government position, as part of a compromise that would save the country’s fledgling democratic institutions from a breakdown like the one in Egypt. The Egyptian case is sometimes held up as a counter-example, with alleged misuse of power by the Muslim Brothers under the presidency of Muhammad Mursi (2012-2013). I have discussed this issue in detail in my report for 2013.

The conclusion is, that despite obvious mistakes and debatable decisions made by Mursi, the commitment of the Muslim Brothers to a continuation and development of the nascent elected institutions of Egypt remained clear. In general, the Egyptian case shows that while most actors are, in principle, in favour of democracy, with the Islamists this has been reinforced in practice by the feeling that elections would bring them to power. For many other groups, things worked the other way around. The initial phases of a democratisation process will always be tense. In order to consolidate the democratic institutions, the losers need to gamble on a trust that is not yet fully there. In the Egyptian case they chose not to.

**Conclusion**

There is no king’s road to democracy in the Middle East, as has been amply demonstrated since 2011. But the establishment of a system, where government office is decided through elections, is a necessary step. When such a system of elected institutions comes into place, it represents a democratic gain of immense importance, disregarding the ups and downs of their actual performance.

- Democratically elected institutions must be vigorously supported against attempts to remove them by unconstitutional means
- Stronger pressure should be exerted on non-elected governments to respect human rights, and to implement reforms to open up for freedom of expression and association, and for democratic elections