Game not Over: The Long Arab spring

True to the term the Arab spring has brought to life a true multitude of hitherto dormant forces that act sometimes in concert but more often than not in conflict with each other. The Arab world has witnessed violent backlashes from the forces of the preceding decades-long winter. Is the spring in terms of an uprising for freedom and democracy now over, and what is left a struggle between terrorist groups, authoritarian regimes, and regional and international powers for control? This is the topic of the present report.

Deconstructing the Chaos: Five Layers of Conflict

To make sense of the current situation in the Middle East and North Africa it is incumbent upon us to understand that what we are witnessing is the simultaneous playing out of multiple layers of conflicts:

- The popular struggle 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”

These layers and the individual conflicts that constitute them are interacting in complex ways. Yet they remain distinct, each carrying their own separate logic and dynamic.

First, there is what started it all: the popular uprisings against the authoritarian and increasingly corrupt regimes that had dominated the region for many decades. These uprisings has obviously faced tremendous setbacks: a bloody counter-revolution in Egypt, the collapse of the democratic transitions in Libya and Yemen into civil war, the early crushing of the democratic uprising in Bahrain, and the drawn-out civil war in Syria which has killed hundreds of thousands and driven nearly half the population from their homes. Even in Tunisia where the new democratic system survives by the skin of its teeth, the optimism of 2011 has largely gone. Yet this does not mean that the forces for change have gone. It may well be that in resignation some people in the region will answer in opinion polls that a strong man is more suited to the region than democracy. But 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 from security force repression abates, the youth return to the streets with the same demands. Within the continued resistance against the old regimes, however, there are deep conflicts complicating the picture. There is for one thing the polarisation between Islamists and non-Islamists, especially toxic in Egypt. This polarisation has led some secularist forces to jump ship and take the side of the regimes, others continue to oppose authoritarianism but refuse any cooperation with Islamists. Then there is the jihadist phenomenon. In some sense it is not easy to classify. For at one level it could well be seen as one wing of the broad front against the despots, merely calling for armed rebellion where others call for peaceful means of protest. Many groups of jihadi background, both in Libya and Syria, have even followed the example of the early Egyptian jihadis in the Gamaa Islamiyya and adopted democracy in terms of free elections in a multi-party system as the preferred basis for Islamic government. But with groups like the so-called Islamic State (IS) and al-Qa’ida affiliates like the Syrian Nusra Front the case is different. The idea carried by these groups on Islamic government is not only virulently sectarian, refusing the recognition of any rights for Muslims other than those committed to the understanding of the religion seen as correct by these groups. It is also staunchly anti-democratic, aiming to secure absolute power for its self-appointed leaders by the force of guns.

Secondly, as the revolts have shaken the regimes, they have by the same token opened up a Pandora’s box of unresolved tensions internal to the various Arab countries; tensions between ethnic and religious groups and between different regions and cities. These tensions have somehow been kept under lid by the regimes’ blocking of independent popular organisation and political action. Like in other areas - witness the many ethnic conflicts in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Unions and its communist system - the weakening, crumbling or toppling 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 organisation, it also brings forth the grievances of ethnic or religious groups and of regions that have felt discriminated against. The Kurds of Syria have long fought for autonomy and the rebellion against Asad created a window of opportunity to advance those demands. The Coptic Christians of Egypt for the first time started voicing their calls for an end to discrimination in street demonstrations. In Libya the city of Benghazi rose against Qadhafi’s tyranny but also against what was seen as a long-time marginalisation of the city and of Eastern Libya more generally on the part of the authorities in Tripoli. 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 typically may face the opposition of other parallel groups who feel their position or their own aspirations threatened by these demands. So in Bahrain the revolution rapidly split when most Sunnis chose to rally behind the (Sunni) regime fearing that the revolution might result in the majority Shia taking over. In Libya the revolution fractured along several lines, but not least at work was the rivalry between militias based in various cities and localities across the country. In Egypt Christian manifestations for rights tend to trigger reactions from some Muslims jealously guarding Muslim privilege. It is true that in the playing-out of these
tensions more often than not the instrumentalisation of them by incumbent regimes has been at work. Yet precisely the potential for this instrumentalisation is a sure indication of the existence of deeply-rooted conflictual relations.

Thirdly, over time not only local regimes have been shaken. For decades a slow process has been at work where the grip of global powers over the region, established since the end of World War I, has loosened bit by bit. Despite the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, its continued military activity in the region and its continued support for incumbent regimes, and despite the recent Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict, the ability of outside powers to control developments in the region is nowhere near the control exercised by the US and the USSR during the decades of the Cold War and by Britain and France in an earlier period. This change is the background for an emerging rivalry between major regional powers for economic, political and military influence. The turbulence in the wake of the Arab spring, and the break-down of state power in several states, has created a partial power vacuum that the rivaling regional powers compete to fill, most notably Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Egypt for the time being mostly absorbed in its internal troubles).

Fourthly, another layer of conflict is added as global powers – most notably the US and Russia, but also China, the EU and individual EU members like Britain, France and Germany - 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 various ways it is at work across the region.

Finally, 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 and has a dynamic of its own. Arab Muslim resentment against Western domination and against Western-allied corrupt and oppressive regimes at home has typically fostered movements, whether Islamist or not, aspiring for more democratic rule. Yet at the margins it has also produced a deeply authoritarian and sectarian-chauvinist trend epitomised by movements like al-Qa’ida and IS. This trend is referred to as jihadist, a reference to its privileging of the duty for all good Muslims to take up arms in a sacred struggle to topple what it sees as infidel regimes across the Muslim region, as well as against the great infidel powers of the world, led by the US. It is important, though, to distinguish between the jihadist trend in this sense and appeals for military jihad in general. In many cases where Muslim populations are involved in what they consider just struggles against occupation and oppression, in particular where the enemy is non-Muslim, calls for armed uprisings in the name of jihad will be issued. A prime example is the Palestinian Hamas movement. This movement, now governing Gaza, has an armed wing and has been involved in armed confrontations with Israel and has even at intervals used terror against Israeli civilians as part of its methods. Yet it does not make part of the jihadist movement, but rather belongs to the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood (MB) network. This implies among other things that it supports popular sovereignty and elected government, and that its privileged method of change within Muslim society is peaceful reform work. What has singled out the jihadist movements proper for grand declarations of war from leaders of major international powers has primarily been their demonstrated willingness to use acts of terror directed against Western citizens.
both in their home countries and around the world. While the Western response can certainly not be isolated from economic and strategic considerations of interests vis-à-vis the region, the effort to weaken or destroy the terrorist organisations and networks has certainly taken on a life of its own. This is indeed why it has been possible for authoritarian incumbent rulers in the Middle East to turn it to good use, posing as the natural allies with the West in the war on terror. Inside the Middle East, meanwhile, over time the guns and bombs of the jihadists have to come to be directed as often against Muslims deviating from what the terror groups consider the true Sunni faith as against the regimes. So Shia Muslims, have, along with non-Muslim religious minorities, become central targets for acts of terror. One of the effects of this has been to increase tensions between people belonging to different confessions and to weaken the popular struggle for reform of, or revolution against, authoritarian regimes.

A Complex Web: Individual Actors Navigating the Layers

These five levels of conflict must be understood and investigated on their own terms. This is a necessary first step in any effort to realistically understand current developments in the Middle East. Yet both events as they unfold on the ground, and to an important extent also potential medium- and long-term outcomes, are shaped by the complex intertwining of these levels. To highlight but a couple of examples:

Take the Kurdish struggle in Syria. The Kurdish struggle for national rights, both in terms of the free use of language and preservation of culture and in terms of various degrees of autonomous or even independent statehood, is an old one. It could well be considered as one component of the many forms of popular resistance to the authoritarian Arab states (and in the case of the Kurds also to the regimes in Teheran and Ankara). Since the 1970s for the Syrian Kurds the principal opponent in this struggle has been the Asad regime in Damascus. Violent confrontations has taken place at intervals, yet compared especially to the situation in Iraq and Turkey the Kurdish struggle in Syria has been less developed. When the Arab spring came and with it the Syrian revolt, some Kurdish groups and individuals were involved in the various opposition coalitions against Asad. As the uprising turned into a protracted civil war, the situation changed, however. After internal Kurdish strife the Democratic Union Party (PYD), closely allied with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey, came to dominate the Syrian Kurdish scene, benefitting from the support and training provided by its senior partner. Another important factor was that the regime in Damascus took a strategic decision to concentrate its forces in fighting the rebellion in the heart of the country, withdrawing the bulk of its troops from the less populous Eastern and North-eastern parts. The ensuing vacuum eventually came to be filled by the forces of what we now know as IS, moving freely across the border with Iraq where this group had emerged in the aftermath of the US invasion in 2003. Yet the PYD and its armed wing the People’s Protection Units (YPG), managed in parallel to establish control of most of the Kurdish-inhabited regions along the border with Turkey. As the situation developed the Kurds found themselves surrounded by IS to the South and Turkey to the North, while in the West also rubbing against areas held by the armed opposition groups fighting Asad. The Damascus regime had, apart from some isolated garrisons, little military presence left in or bordering the Kurdish areas. IS was
virulently hostile to the Kurds (as indeed towards any force challenging its hegemony). To the North Turkey, after a period of rapprochement between Ankara and the Kurds had increasingly gone sour, in July 2015 shifted back to all-out war against the PKK forces. In this situation Ankara came to see the Kurdish struggle in Syria, led as it was by the sister party of the PKK, as a direct threat against its own security and territorial integrity. So the Kurds were facing strong enemies along most of their newfound borders. As for the rebels fighting Asad in the central parts of the country, along the North-South axis with Damascus and Aleppo as the main population concentrations, these groups received the support of Turkey, now clearly defined as an enemy by the Kurds. And generally these overwhelmingly Arab forces were not particularly positive towards Kurdish autonomy, and definitely not towards a break-up of Syria’s territorial integrity. In this situation the Kurds chose what may at most be termed a neutral line vis-à-vis the regime in Damascus and its backers from the Lebanese Hizbullah, Iran and Russia. They have been involved in hard battles with IS, notably over the town Kobane. In the West Kurdish forces have clashed with the anti-Asad opposition in the areas North of Aleppo, when bombing campaigns have forced IS to retreat from previously held areas. The Kurds have sought to expand their control, thus at least de facto serving to support the position of the Asad forces, whom the Kurds do not fight. A more surprising element of the situation, perhaps, is the fact that the emergence of Syrian territory as a focal point for the “war on terror” has brought to the Syrian Kurds the support of the US. This is noteworthy on several levels. For one, in this case the US is supporting PYD which is the Syrian counterpart (some would say a satellite of) the Turkish PKK, which the US officially lists as a terrorist organisation. The motivation for this from the US side is obvious: the fight against global terrorism takes precedence and PYD and its guerrilla fighters is currently considered, along with the Kurdish peshmerga in Iraq, the most efficient fighters against IS.

One bizarre aspect here is that this US-supported group in Western Syria has been at war with anti-Asad groups who are also supported by the US. That support springs from another logic: the fact that the US have repeatedly called for the fall of Asad as a prerequisite to building a new stable Syria. Summing up this example we see for a start that the struggle of the Syrian Kurds, while somehow making part of the general fight against oppression in the region, is at heart the struggle of an ethnic group for right to self-determination. Thus the Kurdish organisations operate a set of calculations of interests that is distinct from that of the general rebellion against Asad. This has led them to split from the fight against Asad, to take an at best neutral stance vis-à-vis the regime, and at times to enter into military confrontations with anti-Asad fighters. This result has to do not only with inter-ethnic tensions within the forces wanting regime change, but also with the particular configuration around the Syrian civil war of the three other layers of conflict mentioned above: regional powers, international powers, and global terrorism. One factor here is the position of Turkey, which supports the anti-Asad rebels, yet is locked in deep conflict with the Kurds. Another is an urgent need for support against IS, which has probably helped turn the Kurds away from conflict with the regime. This situation has also made possible an alliance with the US without aligning with the US policy on Asad. Finally the heavy engagement of Iran and Russia has most likely tipped the scale for the Kurds in the direction of the wisdom of not challenging Damascus directly. Still the dilemma remains that
when the dust has settled, if the Baath regime remains in power, it is hard to foresee it acquiescing in Kurdish self-rule, not to speak of independence.

From another angle it is instructive to consider the positioning of Saudi Arabia in relation to the uprisings of the Arab spring. At least three factors play a role here: first, Saudi Arabia as a bastion of autocratic rule, second, Saudi Arabia as an aspiring regional power, and third Saudi Arabia’s economy. The rulers of the kingdom detest everything which smacks of popular aspiration for democratic rule. As such the whole Arab spring was seen from Riyadh as a very serious threat against the powers that be, and not least something which risked spreading to its own population the poisonous idea of popular sovereignty. Saudi Arabia was furious with the US for not acting to support the rulers of Tunisia and Egypt when protests erupted there in December 2010 and January 2011 respectively. The kingdom moved swiftly to quell the first (and so far only) uprising in its backyard, in Bahrain, sending in troops. Tactically for a while after that the Saudis kept a low profile, and accepted that resolutions more or less supportive of the movements for democracy and freedom were passed in the Arab League. In the light of later developments one should probably interpret this as a cautious attitude. The kingdom did not want to expose itself to criticism as the bulwark of authoritarianism in the region. Meanwhile it was biding its time for a more propitious moment to strike against the spring. This would seem to be confirmed by developments in, and related to, Egypt. When general Sisi toppled the elected president on 3 July 2013 the Saudis together with their Gulf allies Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) immediately endorsed the coup and in a matter of days pledged 12 billion US dollars in support for the coup makers. On 14 August 2013 the new rulers massacred 1000 demonstrators in the streets of Cairo. They went on to incarcerate tens of thousands of political prisoners, gradually widening the scope of the repression from the Muslim Brothers to anyone daring to oppose the regime regardless of political ideology. All the while the Saudis stood firmly with Sisi and kept up the flow of financial aid. When the Egyptian regime in December of the same year declared the Muslim Brothers, by far the strongest organised group in civil society and the victor of all the free elections that had taken place after 2011, a terrorist group, the Saudis and the UAE followed suit. The Saudis’ relation to the Muslim Brothers has gone through several phases over the years. Especially in the 1960s there was an alliance between the two against the radical Arab nationalists led by Egypt’s president Nasser. For the Saudis, Nasser and like-minded nationalists especially among military officers represented a deadly threat, as they took power and toppled monarchies and expropriated the holdings of landed elites in one country after the other: Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Sudan. For the Muslim Brothers Nasser and his like were enemies because they had crushed the Islamist movement, executed many leaders, thrown tens of thousands into jails where torture was rife and driven the rest underground or into exile. The Saudi-MB alliance weakened over time, and the relationship markedly soured after the Brothers (except the Kuwaiti branch) refused to support the American military intervention in the crisis triggered by the Iraqi invasion and annexation of Kuwait in 1990. Yet the basic problem with the Muslim Brothers from the Saudi point of view is the fact that the MB have always conceived their ideal Islamic rule as based on the people’s right to elect its rulers. This is anathema to the Saudis whose Wahhabi strain of Salafism in its official version calls the good Muslim to exercise absolute obedience towards the ruler
that be: identified as the *wali al-amr* of the Koranic verse 4:59. The fact that the Brothers and their affiliated movements around the Arab world have since the 1980s moved steadily closer to envisioning the preferred Islamic system in terms of a multi-party democracy has only made matters worse for Riyadh. In a time where the framing of political belonging and aspirations with reference to the faith has been clearly dominant in Arab societies, the Saudis have striven to capture the hegemony over the interpretation of the faith. The Brothers threaten that hegemony, and should something like the MB vision of Islam gain broad traction inside Saudi Arabia itself the rule of the House of Saud might be in grave danger. In the event, as several countries from 2011 onwards opened up to free elections, the House of Saud saw the Brothers win elections and move into government positions in Tunisia and Egypt, and in Morocco the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), close to the Brothers, came to lead the government after the king introduced some limited political reforms to forestall an uprising in the country. In Yemen the Brothers became part of the coalition government between the old regime and the opposition, ironically formed after a negotiated transition deal brokered by the Saudis. Yemen is indeed an interesting aspect of the shifting negotiation of Saudi interests in the post-2011 regional chaos. Yemen is of huge strategic importance to Saudi Arabia. A poor country with a population larger than the number of Saudi nationals and a long shared border, Yemen is a potential factor for instability nervously watched from Riyadh. It is interesting here that instead of propping up the incumbent president Ali Abdallah Salih, as they did with the Bahraini king, the Saudis chose to act as an arbitrator between the regime and the revolutionaries. The motivation here, in a phase when momentum was still on the side of the oppositional forces in the region, was probably to contain the situation. Any direct military intervention in mountainous Yemen would have seemed vastly more costly and with a much more uncertain outcome than rolling some tanks over the causeway to the tiny islands of Bahrain. The Saudis then hoped to be able to exercise enough influence to secure that the post-Salih regime would not threaten its interests. As the transition became bogged down the rise of the Houthis changed the situation drastically. The Houthi rebellion started in 2004 in the Northern provinces and to an extent represented both a protest against government marginalisation of the North and a revival of Zaydi religious identity. The Zaydi Shia constitute 35-40 percent of the Yemeni population, and were historically politically dominant, their imam being the monarchical ruler of then North Yemen until the 1962 revolution there. Although Salih, president until 2011, is himself of Zaydi background, the central government struck back hard against the Houthis. Yet they were never fully beaten; the rebellion simmering on until the revolution of 2011. In the power vacuum created by splits in the army and the stalled political transition process, the Houthis were able to go on a renewed military offensive, and in the process forged an alliance with their old foe Salih. He had been forced to resign as president in late 2011, but was hanging on to the leadership of his party, the General People’s Congress, and a significant number of army detachments remained on his side. During 2014 the Houthis were able to overrun almost the whole country and grab *de facto* power in Sanaa, driving the transitional president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi into exile. In this situation the Saudis swung into action. With the aid of other Gulf states the kingdom initiated an air campaign against the Houthis and the Salih forces, and provided support for the forces of the Hadi government.
and popular resistance units set up to fight the Houthis. This intervention changed the balance of forces. The Houthis were driven mostly out of the South, and are being pressed in the provinces East of Sanaa. Yet to a large extent the fighting at the moment of writing seems to have reached a stalemate. What matters in our connection here is the Saudi weighing of interests, which made the kingdom move from facilitating negotiations to military intervention in favour of one of the parties of the civil war. The main consideration here would seem to be the role of Iran. It seems clear that Iran is providing military and financial support for the Houthis, although the scope of this aid remains uncertain. For Saudi Arabia Iran has for a long time been seen as the main regional rival for economic and political influence. This turned to outright animosity after the 1979 revolution in Iran toppled the monarchy there and promoted a revolutionary interpretation of Islam that also had wide appeal to radical youth across the Middle East and North Africa. Saudi Arabia moved swiftly to contain Iranian influence by mobilising age-old prejudice against the minority Shia brand of Islam among the majority Sunni populations and especially among the youth of the burgeoning Islamist movements. At the same time it quelled an uprising among its own Shia population, historically a majority in the Eastern province which incidentally holds most of Saudi oil reserves. Since then the relationship with Iran has had its ups and downs, but in the last decade the Saudis have grown increasingly wary at the growth of what they sometimes described as a Shia crescent threatening Sunni interests in the Gulf. This crescent is seen as stretching via Iraq, dominated by the Shia since the US invasion of 2003, via staunchly Iran-allied Syria and the Khomeinist Hizbullah movement of Lebanon, via Palestinian Islamist movements like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Sunni but supported by Iran, down to the Shia Houthis of Yemen. There are many problems with this idea of a coherent Shia crescent. Not only are the Palestinians not Shia. While the Iraqi and Lebanese Shia belong to the same imami or Twelver subsect as the Iranians, and are dominated by political parties with an Islamist orientation within or close to the Khomeinist fold, the case is quite different with Syria and Yemen. In Syria the Alawi sect to which the Asad family belongs and which only make up at most 10 percent of the population is extremely heterodox and has little in common with the imamis. Besides that, the governing Baath party has been a staunch advocate of secularism so there is little ideological affinity between the Asads and Teheran, merely an admittedly tested strategic alliance. In Yemen on the other hand the Houthis definitely see themselves as a religious movement, the official name of the movement being Ansar Allah (Supporters of God). But the Zaydi sect is quite far removed from the imamis and in many respects rather close to Sunnism. Still it remains a fact that Iran has been able to further its position in the region through alliances of varying closeness and based on incentives ranging from close ideological affinity to cold strategic calculation. When events sped up after the turmoil of 2011 there is no doubt that Riyadh felt acutely nervous that Iran was establishing an increased say in regional affairs. The rapprochement between the US and Iran resulting in the nuclear deal signed last year did not help. So Riyadh threw its weight fully behind the transitional government fighting the Iran-backed Houthis and their ally Salih. The result is that the Iranian factor here led the Saudis, in stark contrast to the line they took in relation to Egypt, to support the side in the civil war that somehow expresses the continuation of the revolutionary process from 2011. Incidentally the Muslim Brothers is a significant force within this side through their central role in the
main pre-2011 opposition formation, the Islah party. Moving to the case of Syria the contrast becomes more glaring. Here the Saudis early on decided to support the armed uprising against Asad, despite the fact that popular rebellions against rulers is anathema to Riyadh. No attempt at choosing groups to support which may somehow be positively disposed towards the kingdom can quite remedy the stimulus to anti-authoritarian forces in the region that would emanate from the fall of yet another dictator. But here again the rivalry with Iran has come to weigh heavier in the scales, and increasingly so as Iran has moved to provide stronger support for Asad, even with its own boots on the ground. To sum up again, in the wake of the Arab uprisings Saudi Arabia is a state unequivocally present on the target side of the protests. It represents an extreme version of the authoritarian state that came under fire, and is also an important ideological pole for the religious legitimation of continued despotic rule. The question of ethno-religious tensions has also pushed it in the same direction. The existence of sizable Shia minorities in Saudi Arabia itself and Kuwait made an independent part of the rationale for the quick and decisive action to quell the Bahraini uprising. The regime even exploited the Bahrain situation and the early response of its own Shia population to the Arab spring to invigorate anti-Shia prejudice among Sunnis, thereby preventing an alliance between reform-oriented forces within the two denominations. On the other hand we have seen how regional rivalry with Iran in several cases came to take precedence over the defence of incumbent rulers, even if in the Syrian case possibly the fact that the rebellion had its main base among Sunnis who felt oppressed by the Alawi-dominated regime also played a role in the Saudis not wanting to be seen defending Asad. With regard to international powers the Saudis have partially aligned with the US on Syria, but the furthering of its interests there have been blocked by the Russian interference. Otherwise the most marked feature of Saudi actions is the increased degree of autonomy with which the country acts, and even goes to war based on its calculations of its own interests. At one level this reflects the Saudis’ feeling of betrayal vis-à-vis the US failure to stand up for Arab rulers threatened by uprisings in 2011. Yet it is also the result of a very gradual lessening of great power ability to exercise control in the Middle East region. Finally the global war on terror and the fight against IS influence Saudi Arabia in complex ways. On the one hand jihadism of the IS or al-Qa’ida brand represents a deadly threat to the kingdom. In the early 2000s Saudi Arabia witnessed a chain of al-Qa’ida attacks on its own territory, and its rulers have been denounced by the jihadists as corrupt infidels who should be toppled sooner rather than later. On the other hand in their conception of Islamic teachings the jihadists remain pretty close to the Wahhabi doctrine preached in Saudi Arabia, not least through the school system. In fact the main doctrinal point on which the jihadists deviate from properly understood Islam in the view of official Saudi Arabia is that in their jihad they act of their own accord without fatwas from official religious scholars and critically without the permission of the ruler. Details are not clear but what is certain is that Saudi funding, private as well as public, has supported movements of Islamic revival that are deeply conservative in their religious outlook and that youth influenced by these movements inside and outside of the kingdom may provide recruiting ground for the jihadists. As Iraq after the US invasion became more and more dominated by Shia politicians, Saudi Arabia may also well have seen its interests served by the emergence of staunchly anti-Shia armed resistance within the Iraqi Sunni population. In its relation
to its own educated youth, large segments of whom remain influenced by an Islamism ranging from the Muslim Brothers to hard-line Wahhabi Salafism\textsuperscript{40}, the Saudis are walking a tightrope. The regime fears jihadism and wants it removed from the scene. Yet at the same time if the regime is seen to side too clearly with the West, or worse with the Shia, it risks triggering reactions which will lead to great unrest, and possibly to the strengthening of the jihadist trend. The much-condemned execution of the oppositional Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr this winter should be seen in this context. 43 jihadists with links to al-Qa’ida were executed on the same day,\textsuperscript{41} so in addition to sending a warning to Iran, the killing of Nimr could well be seen as countering any claim of government bias against the defenders of the true Sunni faith.

**Quest for Stability: A Choice between ISIS\textsuperscript{42} and Sisi?**

This discussion of the Syrian Kurds and of Saudi Arabia and the choices they face and make in the midst of the post-2011 turmoil are mere glimpses of a large confusing picture of strategic and tactical alliances and strategic and tactical tensions and contradictions that cut across the five layers of conflict referred to above. Yet does this mean that the initially promising movements for reform have degenerated into a 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 were to support the strongest military force around, which in most cases happens to be the incumbent regime? Put in other words, is the choice in the current situation one between IS and Sisi?

Such a conclusion, which is in some form certainly on the table in many Western circles these days, and is of course happily promoted by Arab power elites,\textsuperscript{43} does not stand up to careful reading of the facts and thorough analysis.

What triggered the current instability in the first place? Few if any presumed experts can be said to have predicted the Arab spring. Scholars had been busy writing learned explanation for the stability of Arab regimes into the foreseeable future. Yet from that literature it is evident that the same set of scholars saw the incumbent regimes as deeply unpopular. Their legitimacy had been undermined for decades by lack of tangible progress for the common people, by rapidly increasing gaps between rich and poor, by extensive corruption at all levels from the policeman in the street to the government minister, by the brutality and incompetence of the police force, and by lack of viable means for citizens to express their views. There were even less of viable channels for participation and influencing government policies.\textsuperscript{44} So it was that when the first spark was ignited in Tunisia, and in particular when the uprising there succeeded in bringing down the dictator Ben Ali, a wave of protests swept the whole Arab world; its effects being felt even beyond that in countries where people lived under similar regimes. How plausible then is the idea that helping those same regimes reassert full control would be beneficial, even if beneficial here is equated 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. Famous examples would be the latter part of Franco’s rule in Spain, South Korea and Taiwan under authoritarian anti-communist in the decades following the Second World War, and even Chile under General Pinochet after the 1973 coup against the elected socialist president Salvador Allende. Typically the economic development in its turn produces a growth of social forces that proceed to challenge and eventually bring down the dictators, but that is another side of the story. Important here is: are the conditions in place for such economic progress to take place under regimes like Sisi’s in Egypt, the Algerian generals or under a resurrected Asad rule in Syria? History brings surprises of course, yet so far there is nothing to suggest that 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. Rather in the Egyptian case, at least, the rent-seeking attitude of those close to power, and the combination of vested interests blocking economic reform, seem as entrenched as ever. The vision for economic development is presented in the age-old style of grand projects like Sisi’s “second Suez canal” that are highly dubious in their contribution to development but provide ample opportunities for licit and illicit profits not least for the huge economic interests controlled by the Egyptian army, as well as by many of its retired officers. And while the Egyptian regime exhibits utmost brutality in suppressing political dissent, there is scant evidence of attempts at serious reform of the huge inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy. If there is any country where there may seem to be signs or rapid economic development under autocratic rule it would be Morocco. Yet it is interesting, then, that Morocco is also a case of an incumbent ruler who is trying to forestall an uprising by implementing some liberalising reforms, and an Islamist-led government has been in place since 2011. From the young Muhammad bin Salman, “deputy crown prince”, and technically number three in the ruling set-up in Saudi Arabia, but widely seen as the real power these days, comes grand declarations of economic reform. He calls for speeding up modernisation and weaning the kingdom off its massive dependence on oil. Yet the reform proposals are rather vague, and were the young reformer to become serious, his reforms would crash against a vast network of obstructing vested interests, with a highly uncertain outcome. So 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.

Second, the situation in the decades leading up to 2011 also produced the social forces and the ideological trends that came to challenge the power elites through the uprisings. For despite the weakness of economic development and the skewed distribution of the fruits of such development as did take place, still the Arab economies grew, and despite continued population growth they mostly did so also in per capita terms. As a result the resources available also grew for important segments of the population. Not least important here is the role of education. The opening up of access to education for the broad masses was a central part of the programme of the radical officers who took power in many countries in the 1950s and 1960s, and fuelled by oil wealth a huge expansion of education also took place in the oil monarchies that competed with the officers for hegemony. Expansion of education remained high on the agenda in the republics as the second generation of leaders strove to retain legitimacy after the optimistic state-led development schemes ran into deep
Resources did not grow in line with the expansion in numbers of students, and quality suffered badly in terms of lack of qualified teachers, insufficient access to appropriate teaching material, insufficient capacity of class rooms and lecture halls, and outdated methods of learning. Yet the expansion of education did not fail to produce an ever-growing educated middle class, which in its turn did not fail to develop expectations of, and eventually demands for, the right to participate in decision-making. No real opening for such participation took place, yet in some countries there developed an, albeit fluctuating, margin for the growth of civil society organisations. So, with the exception of the extreme case of Libya, and to a large extent Syria and Iraq, a large number of organisations of various size and strength and with various purposes developed: charities, cultural associations, independent student organisations and trade unions, human rights groups, and in the more liberal cases such as Egypt, Yemen and Jordan also political societies and even parties. After the shift of the millennium this simmering organisational life became a basis for an increased number of political protests and strikes. A factor which added to the resources available to especially the educated classes, and also to their restlessness, was the information revolution taking place in those years. Satellite TV (where al-Jazeera from 1996 broke the monopoly of government-controlled broadcasting and ushered in an explosive pluralisation of private channels across the region\textsuperscript{49}) and the spread of the internet and the mobile phone made communication much easier and increased people’s awareness of conditions in other societies. The growth of the educated elite and the revolution in communication and information technology is linked to an important shift in attitudes that took place among the young generation: the marked weakening of patriarchal structures in terms of the power of the older generations over the young. Much less than their forebears the young Arabs of the first decades of the third millennium were willing to fulfil the expectation of obedience towards their elders. This shift certainly affected family affairs and is observable for instance in a reduced acceptance of parental choice of marriage partners as well as of other life choices.\textsuperscript{50} But its effects went much further. The millennial generation of the Middle East were less inclined than earlier generations to accept the unchallenged authority of “patriarchs” also outside the family, whether it be a teacher or headmaster, the local police chief or strongman, a business tycoon or even the president and his ministers. When Mubarak held his last televised speech on 10 February 2011 and started out stating that he was speaking as a father to his children,\textsuperscript{51} he was in effect pouring oil on the blazing fire of the uprising and if anything secured his own downfall. Returning to the current situation: despite the dramatic backlashes against the revolution it would be hard to argue that any of these factors have gone away: the educated elite continues to expand, the information revolution is only temporarily and partially something that can be held back, and not least: the young generation has not reverted to blind obedience, but has if anything lost the little trust they might have had in the authorities. This indicates that efforts to prolong the rule of the incumbent regimes - or worse: to reinstate those that have fallen - promises only prolonged chaos. The genie is out of the bottle and the attempts to put it back has little chance of success, as attested to by the extreme level of violence applied in order to try.

For the incumbent regimes the good enemy is the jihadist, the more extreme the better. The extremists are easy to isolate from the population at large, and not least they are excellent tools for
the regimes in galvanising the support of the US and the West in general. If the contest in the region can be portrayed as being between the current rulers and terrorists who day and night plot attacks against the West and its citizens, military aid will flow in and talk of human rights and democracy will die out. By the same logic the dangerous enemy is those forces that call for reform by peaceful means and advocate free elections, freedom of speech and of organisation, respect for human rights and an end to corruption. So the regimes work hard through their security agencies and their media to thwart the growth of such tendencies that have the potential to gain a large following locally and that might seem more palatable to the West than the current elites. In those countries which do not outlaw all activities that may have an element of political opposition to them, the scope for such activities has been narrowing significantly since 2011, and all sorts of obstacles are put in their way.

A most powerful tool of course is to try to put the terrorist label on the main forces of opposition. This has been applied with particular vigour towards the main Islamist groups in the region. Yet if the West wants to promote long term stability in the region it is precisely groups that seek by peaceful means to establish freedom and democracy that we need to be supporting, regardless of their ideology. This should not primarily take the form of all-out support for particular political parties or movements, but of a principled support for demands that point in the direction of democratic reform. It should include a willingness to put pressure on the incumbent regimes to accept significant concessions via-à-vis such demands. 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. When such elected institutions come under pressure, the West should stick to a dual approach. On the one hand elected governments must be supported against military coups, and sanctions should be applied against coup regimes. On the other those elected to power, while being given sufficient leeway to uphold order, must be warned against measures that would eat away at freedom of expression, of organisation or of elections.

Understanding Islamism in the Post-2011 Scene

Key to understanding the developing situation is to understand the continued centrality of Islamism in its various hues, and what is the content of the role played by Islamist actors in current developments. If the choice is not one between Sisi or IS there needs to be some alternative force present, and there is. Generally speaking it consists of most of the vibrant civil society that had emerged across the Arab world in the decades before 2011, as discussed above. This civil society represents popular self-organisation from outside the apparatus of state. It continues to be heavily dominated by the middle classes. In terms of ideology it ranges from the far left to ultraconservative salafism. Yet through a large part of the spectrum, even well into the salafi groups, it shares at least in principle the ideals of freedom of expression and organisation, and the idea that political office should be elected by the people.

From the research undertaken by our research group as well as others it emerges that still today Islamism is the overwhelmingly dominant trend in the civil societies in the Middle East region.
Consequently a reminder of major further research findings is in place. First, Islamism is not a reaction against modernity, but rather the main ideological expression of the emergence of an ever-growing educated modern middle class. Second, as such, mainstream Islamism represents in many aspects an urge for economic development, rationalisation of public administration and a more representative form of government. Third, at the same time Islamism is an identity movement pitting Islam against Western influence, and thus remains conservative on a number of moral issues and on gender relations.

With this background what has been the role of Islamism in the post-2011 Middle East, and what is it today? Starting at the extreme end of the Islamist spectrum, it can hardly be doubted that the jihadists of the Islamic State and the various affiliates of al-Qa’ida have acted in ways that counter the striving for a more free and democratic political system that underlies the whole Arab spring. They have done so in at least three ways. First, to the extent that they have taken over and ruled territories they have exercised a despotic reign over the population. Second, in several cases in Syria and Yemen they have served as spoilers, launching attacks that derail cease-fires or dialogue projects that could have created the conditions for peaceful processes of reform. Also in countries in civil war the jihadists would often attack those armed groups that fight to accomplish democratic reform. Third, as pointed out above, the jihadists serve the incumbent regimes well as the good enemy, enabling them to portray themselves as protectors of the world against terrorist barbarism.

In between these global jihadists and the mainstream Islamists around the Muslim Brothers there are at least three distinct groups. One is made up of a chaotic landscape of smaller groups of former or current jihad fighters. At one end of this landscape are groups active in the Syrian civil war like Ahrar al-Sha’m, who are not so far removed from the global jihadists in their understanding of the norms of Islam. They will even on occasion enter into military coordination with the al-Qa’ida-linked Nusra Front. Yet they insist that the aim of the war is local, and they have off and on taken part in deliberations with more moderate groups in preparation for peace talks. At the other end are the former jihadists of the Egyptian Gama’a Islamiyya who revised their ideology in the years around 2000 and after 2011 formed a political party and were elected to parliament. Their Party for Building and Development protested the military coup in 2013, but have stood firm in their insistence on peaceful means in the resistance to Sisi’s regime. As for the third group, the non-jihadist salafis, they fall roughly into two. Still a sizable portion of this trend refuses to enter into politics at all, in line with the Wahhabi prescription of obedience to the ruler. But the Arab spring also saw an upswing in the number of salafi-oriented political parties. While mostly remaining staunchly conservative on social issues these parties implicitly and often explicitly proclaim their acceptance of democratic rule. Most salafi groups have during the backlash after the Arab spring stood firm in their call for the upholding of democratic rights and condemnation of despotic rule. This goes for most of the strong political salafi trend in Kuwait, and for most groups in Egypt. Yet the most prominent salafi party there, Hizb al-Nur, broke ranks with the democratic trend, and came out in support of the military coup of July 2013.
What then of the mainstream, the parties springing from, or aligned with, the international network of the Muslim Brothers? 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 break-down 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: A Spring Delayed, not Cancelled**

Based on the foregoing it seems clear that the Arab spring of 2011 is still with us and will remain so for the foreseeable future. The popular resentment against oppressive, corrupt regimes is still there. Especially the youth show no sign of returning to an acceptance of authoritarian practices at all levels of society. The old regimes have struck back with a vengeance, yet their rule is not stabilising. The main organised force in civil society, the mainstream Islamists, have been hit hard by the brutal oppression unleashed in the aftermath of the coup in Egypt. Yet they remain the strongest single factor in the resistance to the authoritarian regimes.

The shaking of the old order, the sometimes conflicting sources unleashed by the spring, and the battle zones emerging from the prolonged struggle between the spring and the preceding winter, have produced a complicated web where the struggle for freedom and democracy becomes intertwined with four other layers of conflict. The rattling of central authoritarian control exposes not only the longing for freedom, but also unresolved conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, as well as between social classes and ideological trends. In a situation where mutual trust in democratic mechanisms for conflict resolution is still at best extremely fragile, such conflicts may fragment revolutionary uprisings into parties in armed conflict with each other. This in turn opens the door for rear-guard actions by the powers-that-be who can play on these contradictions among the revolutionaries. At the same time authoritarian backlashes against fledgling attempts at democratisation provides ideal ground for extreme jihadists calling for all-out war against power-
holders and infidels alike in the name of a highly brutal and despotic interpretation of Islam. Through their terrorist methods these jihadists draw global powers into the game according to the logic of the “war on terror”.

The emerging battle zones and power vacuums have also attracted the interference of outside powers, both internal and external to the region. The US and Russia play an active military role in several arenas. Yet the ability of outside powers to control developments in the region has markedly diminished over time. This intensifies the conflicts between ambitious regional powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Yet while the existence of the other conflict lines complicates the struggle against authoritarian regimes, it by no means obliterates it. Rather this struggle remains at the heart of the chaotic situation in the Arab world. 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. While efforts to end military conflict is essential at the current moment, it must be combined with a sustained effort to support demands for freedom and democracy, and not least to give staunch support to democratisation processes and democratic structures where they do emerge.
1 John Hudson, “U.N. Envoy Revises Syria Death Toll to 400,000”, Foreign Policy 22 April 2016, E.

2 For one instance see Shiraz Maher, «Amid a fragile ceasefire, Syria’s original protesters are rediscovering their voice», New Statesman 26 March 2016, European Commission/Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, Syria Crisis, May 2016.


5 For an overview of the development of the Kurdish movement in Syria up until the early days of the 2011 rebellion, see Christian Sinclair, Sirwan Kajjo, “The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria”, Middle East Report, August 31, 2011.

6 This development also exacerbated internal tensions within the Coptic community, see Paul Sedra, «Reconstitution the Coptic Community amidst Revolution», Middle East Report 265, Winter 2012.


9 For a specific look at US decline, see Yaroslav Trofimov, «America’s Fading Footprint in the Middle East », Wall Street Journal 9 October 2015.

10 For one expression of IS’ declaration of war on the Shia, see Mail Online 21 January 2016.


13 This had become evident by late 2012. See for instance «Kurds oust Syrian forces from northern towns», Al Jazeera, 19 November 2012.

14 «Mr. Erdogan’s War Against the Kurds», New York Times 31 August 2015.


18 «ANALYSIS: Kurds welcome US support, but want more say on Syria’s future», Middle East Eye 23 May 2016.


21 «Kuwait Egypt Aid Pushes Gulf Pledges to $12 Billion in 24 Hours», *Bloomberg* 10 July 2013.

22 «UAE lists Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist group», *Reuters* 15 November 2014.


29 «Yemen conflict: No end in sight, six months on”, *BBC* 25 September 2015.


38 Ibid.


41 «Shi'ite cleric among 47 executed in Saudi Arabia, stirring anger in region», Reuters 2 January 2016.

42 The so-called Islamic State is known under various acronyms related to its earlier self-description in Arabic: al-dawla al-islamiyya fi al-'iraq wal-sham’. Two competing translations into English has produced ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), while Arabs often use da’sh (daesh). While using IS throughout this report, ISIS fitted here since it is Sisi backwards.

43 For an analysis of the strong continuity in Western support for incumbent Arab regimes, see Reinoud Leenders, «Arab Regimes’ International Linkages and Authoritarian Learning: Toward an Ethnography of Counter-Revolutionary Bricolage», Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), July 2016.

44 For one of many examples see Kjetil Selvik and Stig Stenslie, Stability and Change in the Modern Middle East, I.B. Tauris, London 2011.


46 Ibid.


49 Ezzedine Abdelmoula, Al-Jazeera’s Democratizing Role and the Rise of Arab Public Sphere, University of Exeter 2012.


52 For a discussion see Brynjar Lia, «Understanding Jihadi Proto-States”, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol 9, No 4 2015.

53 For a discussion of the logic behind al-Nusra’s actions in Syria, see Hassan Hassan, «Syria's peace plan is flawed and Jabhat Al Nusra knows it”, The National 8 May 2016.

54 For an informed discussion of this group, see Thomas Pierret, «Crise et déradicalisation : les rebelles syriens d’Ahrar al-Sham», Confluences Méditerranée, 2015/3 (N° 94).


56 «Tunisia parties reach political agreement», Al Jazeera 13 December 2013.