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BREAKING RULES: DISCIPLINE OR DISORDER IN THE GLOBAL PLAYGROUND

— Janice Gross Stein

We live in disruptive times. Russia annexes Crimea and invades Ukraine. The Islamic State conquers a large swath of territory that crosses the old border between Iraq and Syria, and the rump government of Bashir al-Assad bombs its own people.

Millions of refugees are on the move, desperate to escape the barrel bombs falling from the skies. It seems that the rules are being broken with impunity. But not all disruption is alike; discipline can help with some kinds of disorder, but not with others.

Some of the disruption is familiar noise. Big powers invading small neighbors and carving up territory is a recurring story. Why then did Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine send tremors through Europe and shock the world?

Europe's leaders had persuaded themselves that, after the terrible destruction of World War II, they had built a new order that prohibited using force to change borders.

For the last half century, these rules and norms were challenged only in the southern tip of Europe when the Cold War ended and Yugoslavia disintegrated. After some hesitation, European leaders with military leadership from the United States invested to shore up the rules of order and democratic norms.

Discipline by big powers against smaller, weaker states restored order in Europe's backyard. When the existing order remains in place, consistent discipline can help to reinforce the rules. But, not quite. When Moscow broke the rules and sent its irregulars into eastern Ukraine, it challenged the most central values and rules of the

European order. But Russia is a great power that has long been able to act with impunity in its own backyard.

In Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the former Soviet Union sent its tanks across borders to quell dissent and remove governments it did not like. Outraged leaders in the United States and Europe protested loudly, and did little. The realists won the day.

There was no thought of using force against a great power then, and there is none now. The discipline imposed by economic sanctions is very little, but it is better than doing nothing.

The disruption we are seeing today in the Middle East is even deeper than what Russia instigated: old orders crumbling in ways they have not for a century; and millions of people pushing against the borders of Europe, the safe, democratic haven that they can see but not quite reach.

The hundred-year-old order put in place by Britain and France after World War II in the Middle East is breaking apart, and as it fractures it is not only states that are failing. The Islamic State is intentionally destroying the old order and its rules.

It seeks to abolish state borders and reestablish a caliphate that will claim the loyalty of devout Muslims worldwide. It is no longer a question of shoring up the failing states of Iraq and Syria and reinforcing the rules of the old order by exerting discipline.

The decline of the old order has gone too far to be arrested; the time for discipline within the existing rules is long gone.

Joseph Schumpeter told us almost a century ago that the forces of creative destruction sweep away the old order, making space for innovation and new growth. The modern Middle East has had deeply dysfunctional states, with authoritarian politics reinforced by military regimes and routinized terror. When this order finally dies, few will mourn its passing. But what will emerge in its place?

Amidst the fighting and the flight of millions of people, we cannot yet see even the glimmer of a new order on the horizon. Yet this is a defining moment for the “West” that has believed for almost five hundred years that, with time, encouragement, and, not infrequently, military intervention to reshape politics abroad, the rest of the world will come increasingly to look like us.

The world will become less poor, healthier, better educated, more secular, and more democratic. Our rules will continue to diffuse, we tell ourselves, as they have for as long as we can remember. Yet caution is in order. The world is indeed becoming less poor, healthier, and better educated. But it certainly is not becoming more secular, nor is it necessarily becoming more democratic.

As the old order collapses, new forms of governance will emerge, organic to the region, which reflect local values, norms, and histories. The rules these new kinds of governance generate will likely be different from our own, and the first-order challenge will be to figure out how these different systems of rules can fit together.

Inevitably, the process will be disorderly, messy, experimental, and incremental. And while these experimental processes are going on to clarify how different kinds of rules fit with one another, the realists will again win the day.

Even the realists, however, will have to speak loudly but carry a very small stick.

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