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REBUILDING THE MIDDLE EAST: FROM CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL SOCIETY

— Paul Salem

The Middle East is lost in transition. Forces of demographic growth, slow economic development, resource strain, and climate change, coupled with people's increased access to information and mobilization, have run up against rigid political institutions, unequal economic arrangements, and unresolved cultural contradictions. This has led to the collapse of states, the tearing apart of national societies, and the eruption of civil and regional wars.

The disintegration is profound, with a fundamental questioning of the borders of nations, the nature of the state, the components of the social contract, the place of God and religion, the role of women, and the premises of the Westphalian system and regional order. Europe went through similar disorder in its tortured, centuries-long transition; it passed through multiple upheavals, revolutions and counter-revolutions, and two world wars before it found some resolution in the arrangements of the post-World War II order.

The transition in the Middle East will be arduous and decades-long, and its outcome is uncertain. But, in the meantime, the region and the international community face immediate challenges that require a clear set of priorities. The signposts along the road should include the following:

First, stay the course in the war on terror. Even though terrorist groups are the symptoms, not the cause, of the region's disintegration, they are a symptom that cannot be allowed to fester, and must be met head on. The war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria is proceeding effectively; in a second phase, the war must pivot to addressing al-Qaeda's affiliates in Syria and elsewhere.

Second, end civil wars and reweave national compacts. The civil wars raging in the Middle East are also the result of deeper dysfunctions, not the cause, but they are now the hurricane-force storm systems that are devastating entire countries, killing hundreds of thousands, displacing millions, and providing conditions in which armed non-state actors, and transnational terrorist groups, thrive. Wars, including civil wars, are the continuation of politics by other means. While force plays a role in politics, these civil wars can be sustainably resolved only in the context of a negotiated political settlement that leads to a compact acceptable to the bulk of the population. Iraq has the constitution and rudimentary political institutions to accommodate such negotiation, but it will require sustained support to find a sustainable accommodation among its constituent components.

Yemen and Libya are in an even more desperate condition, but in both cases there are UN-led negotiations to end the civil wars that are ongoing and that have shown signs of promise. Only in Syria has the political pathway been cut off, with the regime and its backers seeking to fight their way to victory through a combination of temporary ceasefires and moving fronts. There is no military pathway to a stable Syria without a political settlement.

Third, stand up collapsed states. There is no substitute for the nation state as the main pillar of security and stability, in the Middle East or anywhere else. Where states have collapsed because of the breakdown of the compact between state and society, a negotiated settlement and new national compact should pave the way for the rebuilding of state institutions. The regional and international communities have a keen interest in standing up failed states and their

institutions as the most durable and cost-effective way to manage threats and sustain stability.

Fourth, de-escalate regional conflict and rebuild regional order. There will be little progress toward ending civil wars, draining the swamps that enable terrorist groups, and rebuilding national and state stability if the Middle East remains buffeted by conflict among its main states. The conflict between Iran on the one hand, and its Arab and Turkish neighbors on the other, has been a main driver of civil war and radicalization in recent years. But the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict also drives division and radicalization, and recent developments warn of an upcoming confrontation between Israel's and Iran's proxies, or even with Iran itself. Despite repeated disappointments, efforts to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict must remain a high priority; and despite some progress in relations between Iran and Turkey, and some disjointed efforts at Iran-Saudi talks, there needs to be a sustained diplomatic effort to find agreement between those three main players about the principles and pillars of a new, stable, and prosperous Middle East order.

Fifth, in the long-term, invest in economic development, good governance, and civil society. Economic need has been, and will remain, a primary driver of unrest in the Middle East. With dwindling water and land resources, and high vulnerability to the effects of climate change, the region's challenges are particularly acute.

Regional and global leaders should prioritize the needs of reconstruction in the short-term, and economic investment and integration in the longer term. It's the economy, stupid, will remain a verity for the foreseeable future.

Finally, economic development, political stability, and security will not be achieved or sustained without progress toward better governance — that is both effective and accountable — and a vibrant civil society. The struggle for effective and accountable government in the West was long and arduous, and it will be no less so in the Middle East. While political progress in the Middle East seems to be of the “one step forward, two steps back” variety, there is no alternative to encouraging states to improve and reform, enabling citizens to be active and vigilant members of their national political institutions, and empowering civil society.

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