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Break-up of the Middle East:

This picture has given rise to the claim of fragmentation of the region so much so that it is now hackneyed to even raise the point. Developments during recent years, from refugee influxes to the rise of IS, have only aggravated a trend which is set to become more acute. The reversal of this trend is an uphill battle: instead, we would be better-served if we change our ideas about the fragmentation. It is here that the region can create an opportunity from one of its many challenges.

Forces of Interconnection

Fragmentation means the crumbling of the national and regional order and the breakdown of state authority. But and this might sound paradoxical - it can also mean interconnection. Put it another way: more than ever, the region is becoming chaotically interconnected.

In recent years, when speaking of the breakup of the region, the focus has mostly been on the Arab uprising that evolved into civil wars. Exacerbated by regional and international power struggles, these conflicts fractured both the region's states and their societies.

But there are other, more structural roots behind regional fragmentation or interconnection, which have been at the heart of the modern Middle Eastern state system since its inception and only been aggravated by recent disorder.

Take the Kurdish issue. Spread across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, Kurdish national movements have undertaken armed insurgencies since the early 20th century, when the modern Middle Eastern state system was established.

The Kurdish community may have been spread across four countries, but it has had a demographic and geographic continuity which transcends borders. This transnational cohesion of Kurds has put significant pressure on the borders of these countries, despite the fact that they had invested significant resources and energy in strengthening and securitising their borders.

Since the the Arab uprisings, the Kurdish issue has become more interconnected than ever at a regional level while the transnational nature of Kurdish groups has gained further momentum. The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) - which emerged in, and was intended to fight against Turkey - is now the umbrella organisation of the most powerful Syrian Kurdish group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and has another offspring in Iran, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK).

The PKK's policies and strategy are no longer driven just by its policies towards Turkey: if anything, Anakara's Kurdish peace process largely came into being, then crumbled, as a result of developments in Syria.

At the grassroots level, a regional Kurdish public sphere has emerged particularly as a result of the fight against IS.

The interconnectedness of the Kurdish issue at a regional level forces countries with large, restive Kurdish populations to design policies which deal with the Kurdish issue together, given the looming spectre of regional upheaval. It is no longer an option to devise policies in a silo.

As the issue has become deeply regionalised, with a strong international dimension, the solution has to be regionalised as well. And this is intimately linked to how the post-crisis Middle Eastern state system will address the question of the different identity groups major and minor ones in the region.

To state it differently, the Kurdish issue, long seen as one of the primary sources of the fragmentation in the Middle East, is forcing affected countries to think of the region in a deeply interconnected way while formulating policies to address this issue.

Conjectural roots

Moving from such structural sources of the fragmentation-interconnection to a more conjectural one, the issues of the borders, refugees, and non-state actors come to the fore. For instance, the porousness of Syria's borders are not only of concern to Syria itself. It is also a concern to Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. Likewise, the refugees are both the outcome as well as the cause of this fragmentation. According to the UNHCR, Turkey has more than three million registered Syrian refugees, Lebanon more than one million, Jordan close to 700,000, and Iraq around 250,000. Unfortunately, so far there has been little effort spent on how to create a collective framework to deal with this common issue.

As all the countries bordering Syria are experiencing the same challenges in managing the refugee issue and border security, it might be better to invest more time and energy at the regional level to create a collective framework to deal with this issue, at least creating mechanisms that will enable the sharing of good prac-

tices amongst the countries concerned on issues of common interest.

There have already been several suggestions for such a collective effort over the management of migration in the region. For instance, Filippo Dionigi of LSE has suggested the creation of a regional compact for the protection of refugees in the Middle East, which represents one such proposal. Despite this scarce but encouraging scholarship on a region-wide framework, regional policy coordination over refugees remains underdeveloped, if not completely non-existent.

Non-State Actors

Likewise, given the trans-border and transnational nature of most of the non-state actors involved, a regional framework is essential for dealing with this question. In Syria, even the most avid observer of Syrian affairs has lost track of numbers of non-state actors in the country. In a similar vein, it is more appropriate to speak of militia armies instead of militia groups when we speak about the phenomenon in the wider region.

The Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon are acting more like states and armies than non-state actors. Likewise, in Libya, the number of militias are in the range of hundreds of thousands. The Libyan National Army, the Benghazi Brigade, the Libyan Dawn Alliance, Al-Bunyan Al-Marsous, and Zintan are just a few of the key armed groups we could name in Libya.

It is therefore obvious by now that not all these non-state actors are going to be eradicated. In fact, not all these actors should be seen through a negative lense. Such an approach would disregard the nature of the state or regimes that have produced these actors in the first place. The complicated nature of these non-state actors should invite the countries of the region to come together to agree on a framework on the principle of the elimination and/or integration of these non-state actors into the state structure.

There is a widely shared understanding amongst both regional and international players that Islamic State and Al Qaeda should be eradicated. But this consensus falls apart and the situation gets murkier, for instance, when we discuss Shia militias or the Kurdish PYD.

The phenomenon of Shia militias in Iraq and Syria has become a contentious issue. Even on the question of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation), which officially have been integrated into the Iraqi security architecture but still largely operates independently, there is no consensus to be found. Some experts draw a distinction between the Hashd al-Shaabi groups that owe their allegiance to national frameworks or religious authorities, and those owe their allegiance to the Veliyi Fakih, Khamanei. Fragmentation of states feeds mutual insecurity amongst the players of the region. But if this process is seen through a different prism, in terms of providing regional interaction and interconnection, this may lead to a dialogue on how to attain mutual security in the region.

Win-win?

The post-IS period, at least in its territorial form, will be crucial in this respect. It will either lead to further fragmentation through the further intensification of rivalries and proxy wars - with each actor operating within the regional framework in an isolated manner and seeing the as a zero-sum game - or to beneficial discussion on assuring mutual interests. In this sense, the region is not just fragmented. It is also intimately interconnected, arguably more so than at any time since World War I.

In fact, we are witnessing to the regionalisation of the issues and challenges - from identity struggles, to refugees, to border security, to radicalism - in the MENA region. The responses of the states and political elites will define whether such regionalisation of the issues will sow the seeds of some kind of regionalism down the road.

We will be thus better served to situate the discussion of the fragmentation of the MENA region within a more appropriate framework: the forces of disorder and interdependence go hand in hand. The regional political classes' actions will decide which side of this process gains the upper hand.

By adopting a novel approach to fragmentation in the region, governments can view the dynamic of interconnection and loss of state authority as more than a zero-sum game: instead, they will be able to see it through a win-win mindset. This would open up a new chapter in our understanding of regional affairs.

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How the U.S. Promotes Extremism in the Name of Religious Freedom

to these nuances and simply declares the states to be violating their citizens' religious freedom.

In its 2017 report, for instance, the USCIRF, as part of its justification for categorizing Tajikistan as a top violator of religious freedom, lists the country's legislation requiring religious institutions and studies to register with the government. But Tajikistan, which shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, says the purpose of the law is to prevent terrorists from operating in the country under the guise of legitimate religious activity an understandable concern. The USCIRF report also criticizes Tajikistan for a law that requires parental consent before a minor can receive religious instruction. The law in question, however, was instituted in order to protect vulnerable young people from falling under the sway of extremists, who often seek to recruit them in public spaces such as soccer fields and markets. Finally, the USCIRF report objects to Tajikistan's prohibition of the international Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. Yet this group advocates the use of violence to establish an Islamic caliphate and is blatantly anti-Semitic. It is banned in Germany as well as in most Arab countries.

The USCIRF supports the right of Islamist extremists to operate in several Muslim-majority countries.

The USCIRF has also complained in its recent reports that public schools in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan do not allow girls to cover their heads in school. It laments that Tajik law "prohibits headscarves in educational institutions" and cites the anti-headscarf directive from Azerbaijan's minister of education as "repression of independent Muslims." Yet the legislation in question is similar to laws in France and, until 2014, Turkey. In both of the latter cases, the European Court of Human Rights upheld the countries' right to prohibit headscarves in school, under the reasoning that such restrictions to affirm secularism "may be considered necessary to protect the democratic system" and defend against "extremist political movements" that "seek to impose on society as a whole their religious symbols." The USCIRF, however, rejects the court's reasoning and continues to condemn laws that prevent the covering of girls' heads. Although some parents object, countries that pass these laws justify their policies as part of the state's obligation to provide girls with a full, non-segregated education. In the complicated question of parents' religious rights versus the duty of government schools to protect young girls, Washington bureaucrats have little to add and would be better advised to let foreign states work out this question on their own.

Even more troubling than the USCIRF's criticism of official secularism is its defense of Iran's freedom to spread radical ideology in neighboring states. One of Azerbaijan's violations, in the commission's view, is a 2015 law prohibiting foreign citizens from serving as clerics in the country a law that exists for the sole purpose of preventing Iranian and other foreign radical clerics from preaching extremism. One wonders why the commission believes it is in the interest of the United States or the people of Azerbaijan to defend clerics from a theocratic, anti-American state that Washington considers a state sponsor of terrorism.

The USCIRF also criticizes several states for preventing foreign funds from reaching local Islamic organizations. For instance, its 2017 report censured Kazakhstan for blocking the bank accounts of individuals included in the finance ministry's list of people "connected to financing of terrorism or extremism." But not only do these policies respond to the real threat of the spread of radicalism from the Gulf States or Iran, they are also in line with U.S. legislation aimed to combat terrorist financing. The USCIRF is thus actively opposing a key element of the U.S. government's own counterterrorism policies.

An inherent problem with the current system concerns the accuracy of the evidence on which USCIRF bases its conclusions. Because the commission's mandate is to cover the entire globe, it rarely conducts original research, relying instead on reports from local and international NGOs. It then recycles these reports, without independently verifying their accuracy, and puts the U.S. government's stamp of approval

on them. Worse, the USCIRF provides no specific information on the sources of their data beyond naming NGOs and opposition media. In other words, the reader has no basis for verifying the commission's data. A further problem with this approach is that many NGOs are highly partisan groups that make no pretense of hiding their agenda, whether it is to actively support a government or to bring it down. The USCIRF staff, moreover, possesses neither the language skills nor the regional expertise needed truly to understand the intricacies of church-state relations around the globe. This is understandable, given that the commission has only fifteen employees.

CARROTS OVER STICKS

All the states in Central Asia and the Caucasus that have come under fire from the USCIRF maintain positive and constructive relationships with the United States. As a result of these cordial relations, they are amenable to addressing U.S. concerns and advice on issues of religious freedom, provided the U.S. representatives offer the criticism in a spirit of partnership—and are accurate in their claims. But rather than respecting the difficult challenge these countries face and working with their governments to solve this Rubik's cube, the USCIRF seems interested only in naming and shaming. After pursuing this tactic without success for nearly two decades, it's time for the commission and Congress to acknowledge that it doesn't work. The USCIRF is championing the rights of groups that aspire to impose religious coercion on others.

Various liberal democracies around the world have adopted differing models for separating church and state. A stark contrast exists, for instance, between the American and French models. The Muslim-majority states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan have adopted something close to the French model, which upholds public secularism and focuses on defending the state and society from religious coercion. Thus, France and the states following its model limit the expression of religion in the public sphere. This model may seem harsh to Americans, who have never had to contend with a dominant religious authority and have been more concerned with securing freedom for their churches to operate than with protecting their citizens from religious coercion. Yet the USCIRF and other U.S. institutions that deal with religious freedom globally should be more tolerant of diversity in the various approaches to managing the relationship of church and state, and accept that different states with different historical challenges will adopt different models.

Rather than leading to positive change, Washington's current tactics cause bewilderment and anger. One former Tajik minister wondered why United States opposed his country's fight against extremists, and privately asked one of this article's authors whether the U.S. planned to sacrifice Central Asia to ISIS in some future deal with the group. Indeed, at the same time as U.S. forces are bombing the bases of Islamist insurgents in Iraq and Syria, the USCIRF is attacking allies in the Muslim world with secular governments, secular laws and courts, and secular systems of education.

As the Trump administration and Congress appoint new commissioners and weigh the USCIRF's latest report, it is important that they thoroughly rethink the purpose and practices of the commission. Moving forward, several steps need to be taken. First, the USCIRF should recognize that the United States' approach to church-state relations is not the only valid model—in particular, it should accept the legitimacy of French-inspired models that seek to protect state and society from religious coercion. Further, the USCIRF should only report information that it can independently verify. Foreign governments will be much more amenable to U.S. recommendations if they focus only bona fide violations.

Finally, the USCIRF should focus more on carrots than on sticks. Instead of simply classifying and censuring U.S. partners, or demanding sanctions, it should focus on constructive steps that various agencies of the U.S. government could take in cooperation with these governments in order to address problems and improve governance with respect to religious freedom

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