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PolicyWatch 3331

Middle East Mega-Trends, COVID-19, and Beyond: Views from France

by [Gilles Kepel](#), [Charles Thépaut](#)

Jun 12, 2020

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Brief Analysis

A French diplomat and a leading scholar of Islam explore the region's crises and their effects on Western policy, assessing what has changed since the Arab Spring.

*On June 5, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Charles Thepaut and Gilles Kepel. Kepel is the chair of Middle East and Mediterranean studies at the Universite Paris Sciences et Lettres and author of the new book *Away from Chaos: The Middle East and the Challenge to the West*. Thepaut, a French diplomat, is a resident visiting fellow at the Institute and author of *Le Monde Arabe en Morceaux* (The Arab World in Pieces). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

GILLES KEPEL

The rise of global oil prices after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war allowed the Middle East—especially the oil-producing monarchies—to assume a vital role in the global economic system. Yet their worldwide influence has waned in

recent years as prices have steadily declined.

In March, prices reached a historic low when Russia increased its global oil output to gain a larger share of the market. This production spike led to a protracted price war with Saudi Arabia as both countries flooded the market with cheap oil. Notably, their faceoff coincided with declining international demand for oil as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Because of this crash, the rentier economic models put in place by oil-producing states can no longer provide the same levels of economic development and political stability in the region. This new reality will also exacerbate regional tensions along Sunni-Shia fault lines, as Iran remains committed to building a “Shia crescent” that extends its influence from Tehran to Beirut. Tensions will likely remain high within the Sunni world as well, since Qatar and Turkey continue to align against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

In addition, the decline of oil’s centrality in the Middle East will probably change how the Gulf monarchies invest their wealth in the region. These monarchies have historically used Salafism or political Islam more broadly to extend their influence and maintain stability at home and abroad. Going forward, this use of political Islam as a stabilization tool is likely to decline. Saudi Arabia, for example, has moved beyond this tactic domestically, instead pursuing a new national vision based on transitioning to a post-oil economic system, diversifying the economy, and welcoming more women into the workforce. Iran’s reaction to this Saudi shift bears close watching, since Tehran’s revolutionary model has long operated in response to Riyadh’s religious ambitions.

The future of the Middle East post-coronavirus is more uncertain. Countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia have shown economic resilience despite the grave situation caused by the pandemic and other crises. Syria and Lebanon remain fragile, but both could witness a revival if Europe decides to play a greater role in the region’s recovery per its strategic interest in stabilization.

CHARLES THEPAUT

The 2011 Arab Spring opened a new phase in the history of the Middle East. Despite significant differences between triggering factors in each country, one common feature among protestors at the time was the “politics of dignity,” illustrated by a shared sense of exasperation with the political order. Although demonstrators had no unified political agenda, they did share a common aspiration for freedom and dignity.

The same triggers that led to protests in 2011 remained salient last year, when people took to the streets in Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon. As before, most of these protest movements remained leaderless—an intentional strategy meant to shield them from being instrumentalized and undermined by governments. Yet because of this and other factors, they have once again struggled to present tangible alternative solutions to the problems they are protesting. Over time, some of them have lost their ability to make changes in the political order, exacerbating their frustration.

Several structural factors will continue to be crucial as the Arab Spring’s ten-year anniversary approaches. High rates of population growth persist around the Middle East, with UNICEF and other organizations predicting the total population could double by 2050. Economic growth remains too weak for the labor market to absorb so many young workers, leaving new graduates with limited job opportunities. Most of the region’s economies are quite volatile and bound to global financial up and downs.

While these structural challenges linger, the conflicts that followed the 2011 uprisings have shifted geopolitical dynamics in the region. Increasingly, local and regional dynamics are driving events more than the policies of outside powers. The stability of countries like Libya, Syria, and Yemen now depends far more on internal power struggles, state structures, and regional power competitions. This means that the United States and other traditional power players in the Middle East no longer have a defining impact on the internal politics of many countries there.

Washington's intention to reduce its military footprint in the region has amplified this trend. Given the perception of American withdrawal, regional players have filled the vacuum, and Europe has been challenged to assume a more autonomous position in the Middle East. Foreign policy circles in Europe have therefore been debating the idea of empowering a European military force that can make their proposed policies in the region more credible and actionable. One example of this is Europe's proposed maritime security mission in the Strait of Hormuz or Mediterranean Sea.

This summary was prepared by Zied Bouchlaghem. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖



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