

The European Union Institute for Security Studies Arab Futures Report: A Review

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Scope of This Review

This review focuses on the European Union's Institute for Security Studies' Report No. 22 on Arab Futures: Three Scenarios was issued in February of 2015. The report is a summary report of a larger 200-page book that was published after it was issued. The book is not part of this review, however, given that it is presumed to be an elaboration of the report and, conversely, the report contains the essential points of the book, there may not be a significant discrepancy between the two over the points raised in this review. The report's institutional affiliation would lead one to expect a well-researched empirically based foundation upon which an informed projection of the current dynamics might be plotted. What is offered instead falls well short. It is useful as a study in the pitfalls of scenario development from shaky premises and limited implementation of forecasting tools developed over the past few years.

The European Lens

One does not have to go too far into this 57-page report (including contents forward, contributors, and bibliography) to encounter the first disappointment. The opening quote prefacing the report's introduction is from Albert Einstein. This is not an indictment of Einstein in any way, shape or form. The quote is consistent with the hopeful tone of the whole report (another problem addressed later). The point is that this report is signaling through this quote, that it is seeing a distinctly non-European culture through a European lens. It is difficult to fathom why no one bothered to draw upon a massive centuries-old body of indigenous literature that rivals in poetic profundity anything that the West might offer on the region and its peoples.¹ In short, this is not a report of the region on its futures. It is a report about the region and the futures that Europeans are suggesting for it. Bluntly put, it is yet another colonization. It may not be an exploitative one per se. It may be done with the very best of intentions, as with missionaries seeking to spread the faith (crusaders without swords). For a people who have endured waves of empires sweeping over their lands over millennia (the price of being at the nexus of three continents) the practice of envisioned futures imposed from the outside seems all too familiar.

We Don't Know What We Don't Know

The report's introduction acknowledges the enormity of variables that make prediction impossible, but then goes on to oversimplify. One of its several examples comes in page 6 with Figure 1 showing the amount of information in the world doubling every 18 months. This random bit of futures fluff isn't really moored to any specific point. It only brings to mind as an instant retort, the William Gibson quote, "The future is already here it's just not evenly distributed" (Gibson, 2003). Information to knowledge to empowerment exists for

those with access, capability and will. One persistent hobbling factor for the MENA region is that relatively few people actually read newspapers, journals or other print and on-line media from sources that meet journalistic or scholarly standards, often not discriminating between those sources and conspiracy or rumor and this includes those we would ordinarily associate with a professional class (doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc.).

Page 7 of the report, its introduction, states rightly: “What future studies seek to do is to reduce the element of surprise: they narrow the many possible futures down to those scenarios that are probable or indeed preferable, and thereby provide policy-makers with options to shape the future in a certain way.”

This is not controversial as written, except for most of it. Futures studies applied to the intricacies of an entire region should scan for what can deflect the status quo. Engaging in such an effort requires a firm cognitive, and methodological foundation and an eye towards what will shift paradigms. The foundation here appears thin. As will be elaborated upon later, problems with the foundation means that the rest of the structure will not be right. “The Arab Foresight Group” around which this report was constructed appears to have only one futures/foresight person in its midst following a personal query among colleagues in the World Futures Studies Federation. The other 13 individual contributors may have their own expertise in the area, which is, important to be sure, but they are also bringing their own sets of assumptions and attitudes that are then projected forward into their respective versions of preferred, likely and worst-case scenarios. More troubling is that their projections are significantly based upon “megatrends” that are useful but, in some cases, wrong. Their points of departure are, in fact, the litany of the day-to-day tumult that has marked the region since 2011. In this sense the entire report should be more honestly titled “Arab Futures Extrapolated from 2011 If Nothing Else Changes”.

A More Assertive Egypt ... Really?

Page 8 of the report features a rather blurry snapshot of the current alignments and apparently infers that this as the shape of things to come:

Across the region, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, Turkey and Qatar (whose foreign policy seemed to be under review at the time of writing) are now pitted against the conservative alliance led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt. The latter has largely abdicated its role as a dynamic foreign policy player, taking a back seat rather than engaging constructively in present-day politics, while regional politics have entered a ‘Gulf moment’.

What is one to make of this? It is walking in on a game of 3-dimensional chess several moves in. Lumping in the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood with the Shiite Hamas, Hezbollah, Shiite and non-Arab Iran and Sunni Non-Arab Turkey on the single dimension of their “being pitted against” KSA, UAE and Egypt is a rather myopic reading of the region’s political dynamics. There is no mention of the foundational context of the players such as the distinct cultural, economic and linguistic characteristics of the Arabs, the Turkic Northern Tier, and the Persian Eastern Flank that is necessary to even begin in the most rudimentary way to sort out stakeholder interests. It is at best a snapshot of a roiling brew of shifting alliances that have marked the region throughout its entire history.

What’s more the report’s authors deem Egypt as abdicating its “role as a dynamic foreign policy player” as if the phrase had any objective meaning. Would this be perhaps the “Dynamic foreign policy player” of Nasser’s Pan Arabism? Perhaps it’s a reference to the audaciousness of Sadat with the Camp David Accords? It certainly wouldn’t be the security first priorities under Mubarak. It may well be that Egypt is becoming a client state of its Gulf neighbors as a quid pro quo for shoring

up its near-collapsed economy. This editorial opinion is compounded by the bewildering next phrase, “taking a back seat rather than engaging in present-day politics”, seemingly oblivious to the ongoing tumult of their post Morsi coup d’état. While it is true that Egypt is the largest Arab nation by population, it’s turning inward in the face of economic and political woes is both understandable and perhaps positive. It is worth considering how states in similar crises have been known to embark on foreign adventures to distract from domestic ills.

As for a “Gulf Moment”, that moment has come and gone with the Gulf States own neighborhood threatened.

War is Bad for Business

Page 8 of the report provides some useful observations about Syria’s descent into savage civil war. However, the focus on its current state as being, “a chaotic environment that deters potential investors”, would be laughable if the slaughter and overarching mass outmigration weren’t so real.

Oil’s Slippery Slope

Figure 2. GDP Forecast – Middle East and North Africa on page 10 of the report is already out of date a year out thanks to the collapse of oil prices. This is evidenced by the same World Bank *Global Economic Prospects* report issued six months later than the one cited in the EU ISS report showing a downward revision from 3.8 percent growth rate for the MENA Region to 3.0 percent, a downward adjustment of 21 percent. Thus the fact that the figure is mislabeled for not showing it is in fact a GDP *Growth* forecast is moot.

So these are elements of the report that are foundational. As mentioned earlier, any builder knows that one should never scrimp on the foundation. In this case the report’s foundation is built largely on an assumption about gas and oil prices remaining historically high that can’t support the rest of the report’s structure. Ironically the report is dependent on oil. It has proven to be a slippery foundation upon to rest indeed. It calls into question how the subsequent “3 futures” scenarios can be taken seriously.

Section 1 of the report (page 11) is labeled “Megatrends” which is essentially a lazy form of projection that we should all be wary of going back to the original 1972 Club of Rome “Limits to Growth” report. It so depended on demographic, resource and technological projections based upon the now absurd premise that resource availability is static and finite, technological growth is linear while population growth is exponential, thus completely missing the effects of the Buckminster Fuller’s principle of “ephemeralization”, (more and more with less and less), the “green revolution” and the unprecedented downward inflection in global birthrates that occurred after its issue.

The “megatrends” cited in the report are a checklist of mostly global tendencies that, as a matter of course, would apply to the MENA region as well as everywhere else in the world. They include demography, urbanization, climate change, energy, food prices, literacy rates, internet penetration, and gender equality. These are, in a more stable world, always areas of concern, and indeed need attention by all stakeholders including Europe. However, Europe is now paying a price in the form of a refugee crisis and its own terrorist threats as a consequence for not being more proactive in trying to mitigate these festering issues a full generation ago. Addressing these “megatrends” at this is somewhat down the list of conditions that need treatment.

“Game Changers” or Rearranging Deck Chairs on the Hindenburg?

A second category of inputs is called “Game Changers”. It is more focused on the region and key internal and external impacts. Its categories include youth unemployment, dependence on

volatile food prices, insecurity, regional spillover, democratic change, and inclusiveness. While these are obviously areas of concern, one might more than quibble about certain elements on the list, such as the relative magnitude and the prerequisites for regional spillover (completely undefined and woefully under-addressed in the report), bona fide democratic change and inclusiveness. The democratic change of Egypt's election of Morsi in 2012, and the resulting gridlock between the Muslim Brotherhood and the courts only seemed to underscore the case of opponents who could argue with effect that democracy was a luxury that Egypt couldn't afford. More fundamental to the point is the highly dubious assumption that democratic change in one state (Tunisia being the only credible example) has any significant impact on the region as a whole. It is hard to know from the report whether this was the spillover they were intending or hoping for, but here's the thing about spillovers. They are tricky. Was not the assumption democratic spillover the fatal flaw in the American neoconservative logic behind the invasion of Iraq? Is not the regional spillover from that invasion the spawning of ISIS? Is it not regional spillover when Egypt's surplus labor goes to Saudi Arabia, comes under the influence of Wahabism, and returns with a Salafist world view thus making Egypt a far more culturally conservative country than it was a generation ago? Perhaps the greatest literal spillover of all is that of refugees spilling into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and now to Europe. This now massive migration is arguably the greatest generational game changer of them all, but none of these "spillovers" are referenced in the game changers section of the report.

One of the most consequential of the game changers is both not on the list and maybe all over it. To wit, the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile, now about 40 percent complete, when operational will be the 11th largest dam in the world and the site of the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa. Egypt's government is apoplectic over the prospect of any of its life's blood being contained and possibly diverted as Egypt's use of the Nile is already at capacity. This dam, once completed, would, for Egypt, impact every one of the "game changers" listed in the ISS report. To be fair, there is a reference to this development tucked away in the "Wild Cards" section of the report, but again with no context and thus with immensely diminished salience within the larger report.

This gets to the larger more glaring omission (if that is possible) of water availability for the region. One need look no further than the state of the Jordan River valley and its role in exacerbating the mother of all of the region's conflicts, the Israel Palestinian issue. Sharp, 2014, notes that Jordan is one of the 10 most water deprived countries in the world. Verisk Maplecroft's, 2010 index of the top ten nations has 4 MENA nations on its list of top ten water-deprived nations (Sudan, Iraq, Egypt and Syria). That number goes to 5 if Mauritania is included as part of the MENA region (The World Bank doesn't and apparently the EU ISS has followed suit. This situation can only exacerbate tensions in that area. The Arabian Peninsula's ever increasing population will require ever more expensive water systems perhaps including the still feasible towing of icebergs to its shores (Dolatyar & Gray, 2016). The Arab Futures Report devotes a scant 5 lines to water issues and this portion is folded into a much larger description of climate change and ocean/sea level rise.

Ultimately it is hard to know just what "game changers" actually means when applied to the several of the conditions listed especially since disrupters rarely have names until they happen.

So now comes the three potential futures comprised of:

The Arab Simmer, deemed most plausible. Essentially this would be ad hoc firefighting along contemporary lines.

The Arab Implosion, in which states fail. That future would be Libya just not yet evenly distributed.

The Arab Leap, the Enlightenment comes to the MENA region thoroughly sickened by decades of religious war.

Each of these scenarios are fairly consistent with Dator's 4 basic futures with the "Arab

Simmer” being a hybrid of continued growth and conserver/discipline society (Dator, 1979). In the MENA region continued growth and conserver discipline society are one and the same in that the constraints on economic investment, employment, freedoms, jobs and resources are on-track to grow. The long-term consequences of this simmer are also likely to grow with Europe facing strains on most of their constituent governments to cope with ongoing flight of people from these constant crises. According to the simmer scenario 4.6 million Syrians alone would have fled their homelands 10 years hence, when number of registered Syrian refugees in March of this year stood at 4,815,868 (UNHCR, Government of Turkey, 2016). The amplification of mass migration that is already a major challenge to the EU’s internationalist values might break it. In other words, this likely future may spell the end of the European dream as originally envisioned and the beginning of another order too embryonic to determine.

“The Arab Implosion” is the decay of the simmer to the point of catastrophe. It would be akin to a dying star going nova or even supernova. The most current example is Libya where there is no credible government at all with ISIS as active a player there as in Syria and Iraq. This, by the way, is another major area in which the ISS report got it wrong in smugly declaring ISIS on the run and confined to ever shrinking territory in the “simmer” section (p. 27) and then, within the context of the implosion scenario, blaming an all out war on ISIS by MENA states for their not implementing needed reforms. In fact ISIS and other terrorist groups flourish in areas where governance has collapsed as in Somalia, Anbar Province in Iraq, and Syria. EU and U.S. dithering about Libya only served to provide ISIS with a new beachhead there (Goldberg, 2016). Perhaps the implosion is already underway as not all disasters go “boom”. In many ways the scenarios are extrapolating recent events. There is little in the way of seeing the scandalous lack of proactive refugee policies over years, which has now come home to roost (literally). The EU was remarkable for not recognizing that the massive diaspora of people from the region has actually been going on for decades albeit often to other MENA countries and Turkey. So, in many ways the implosion is already happening and is now yielding a nova-like explosion of refugees. Nothing at all is said of the continuous immigration of settlers from Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere into Israel. This has the perverse effect of exacerbating tensions with Palestinians with ripple effects to Jordan and Egypt where the Camp David agreement with Israel is probably as unpopular among the common people of Egypt as the unequal treaties of the Opium Wars were among the Chinese (Hellyer, 2011).

Just as the previous two scenarios envisioned within the Arab Futures report are already out of date, so it appears to be with the transformational third. We are now at the fifth year past the Arab Spring and this scenario had “the global economy and in particular the Eurozone” recovering at this point. This scenario forecast Egyptian growth in 2016 to be at 6.2% whereas the latest World Bank estimates are now at 4.5% and 4.8% for 2016 and 2017 respectively (World Bank, 2016). The scenario went on to speculate that Arab states would finally wake up to find that “the region-wide problems of youth unemployment and terrorism could only be solved in tandem (p. 37). This is a valid point and an important one to pursue as a matter of both immediate and long-term policy. However, the report seemed to think the remedy was one of throwing money at it in the form of economic development funding as if this is something new. The idea of national civilian and community service as an effective social transformation vehicle is not mentioned in the report. Such an initiative would have the multidimensional effects of building self esteem and confidence among idle youth in general and idle young men in particular through laboring on affirmative public projects as a rite of passage to adult citizenship and at a relatively nominal cost. In other words, such a program would provide a state-sponsored test of personal physical and problem solving capacity as an alternative to ISIS and their death cult model. The projects could range from street cleaning to park and garden construction and maintenance and other various kinds of labor-intensive infrastructure development. We now know that the pyramids were not built by slaves but by the vast armies of farmers idled during the Nile floods and undertaken as an act of faith in their

social order, and not insignificantly, as a focus of personal investment in an enterprise larger than themselves much as with war. That kind of massive public works project sustained Pharaonic Egypt for centuries with relative internal peace for centuries. This sort of national integration agenda is thoroughly missing from this Arab Leap scenario, which, in the report is made up of utopian outcomes with little to no detail on how their preferred outcomes would be achieved.

There is a fourth section entitled, “Wild Cards” described as low-probability, high impact events. There were some thirteen of them listed, including some rightfully random regional bits like “chemical weapons in the hands of a non-state actor (possibly happened already as of March, 2016), the fall of the House of Saud, and a Russian proxy war. The “Russian proxy war” indeed seems to be coming to pass already though not as outlined in the report. The Russian scenario involves Russia engaging antagonistically with Egypt and perhaps KSA. Instead, Russia has entered into Syria on behalf of the Assad regime in what appears to be a natural alliance to stabilize an ally and probably realize a centuries long dream of establishing a warm water port beyond the Dardanelles. The Russians, as a nation of chess masters, often extend that metaphor into their geopolitics. They, with some accuracy, have determined that the Gulf States, KSA, and Egypt are more pawns than back row pieces even in their own region and have moved decisively based upon that calculation.

Summary

The report seems to suffer from simultaneously having too many cooks and not enough of them. The report has the feel of notes compiled from a structured brainstorming session. A more substantial number of indigenous intelligentsia, opinion leaders, and visionaries might have been consulted to better inform this study and fill in the blanks and smooth its rough spots. It would have had the benefit of more fully informing the authors and report readers on the people and their ideas most likely to shape the region’s futures. This would not be a simple gathering of the usual suspects of academic area specialists, foreign ministry hacks, and EU and UN bureaucrats. Rather it would identify those in the shadows of civil society including various regional schools of Islamists, secular liberals, disaffected/dissenting insiders (very important indeed) and charismatic figures yet to be classified. This would take some serious investment in time and analysis, but with a complex and dynamic region such as this there can be no shortcuts. At least then the narrative would come from the inside out for subsequent critical analysis and ongoing tracking. As written there is no sense of systematic method that provides any guide the report’s three futures. It thus appears that the scenarios are more of a generic template imposed upon the region to produce coherent but predetermined outcomes. The report’s methods seem little more than a cobbling together of existing data about the region that don’t provide a discernable trail to their three possible outcomes as opposed to any number of others.

At the end of the day one has to wonder about how useful this report can be. Despite the impressive cover and EU affiliation, there is little guidance in it for policymakers. As with the first Limits to Growth report, it’s greatest utility it may be as a study in how not to do forecasting. Certainly the one thing worse than determining future options for the blind is to put on sunglasses on them and call that a remedy. This report is simply the wrong tool for the job unless the purpose is to signal to others one’s own handicaps.

A final point to make is that this critique pertains specifically to this report. The EU Institute for Security Studies has done good work in other analyses specifically Luengo-Cabrera, (2016) outlining Egypt’s economic triple whammy of tourism loss, declining levels of support from Gulf States due to declining oil prices, and revenue loss from lowered Suez traffic from China’s economic slowdown. Still, a sloppy analysis with projections that fall apart within a year of their issue can taint, for quite sometime, the entire institution. Just ask the Club of Rome.

Notes

1. An example of a more appropriate quote from Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) taken from Beblawi H. and Luciani G. eds. (2016). To clarify, Ibn Khaldun was a Tunisian Arab and died in Cairo. For those unfamiliar with Khaldun and his legacy, this Wikipedia link is informative: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Khaldun: You, O King, went after the farms and took them away from their owners and cultivators. They are the people who pay the land tax and from whom one gets money. You gave their farms as fiefs to your entourage and servants and to sluggards. They did not cultivate them and did not heed the consequences. (They did not look for the things) that would be good for the farms. They were leniently treated with regard to the land tax (and were not asked to pay it), because they were close to the king, The remaining landowners who did pay the land tax and cultivated their farms had to carry an unjust. Therefore, they left their farms and abandoned their settlements. They took refuge in farms that were far away or difficult (of access) and lived on them (the Mobedhan addressing King Bahram.b, Bahram of Persia, p.239).

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