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ARAB TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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## Three Big Trends That Will Shape the Arab World

Arab countries are in the midst of violent convulsions that are fundamentally reshaping the region. While it's impossible to predict exactly how the chaos will unfold, there are three major trends that will define the future. All three promise more catastrophic scenarios over the next few years unless governments reverse course.

First, political violence is remaking Arab societies.



Maha Yahya

The violent onslaught of the self-declared Islamic State (IS) and the loss of state control over national territories have uprooted millions of individuals, families, and entire communities mainly in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. Today, more than 53 percent of the world's refugees are in the Arab region, which is home to only 5 percent of the global population, and conflict has affected at least nine countries.

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The significance of this process goes far beyond its humanitarian implications. On the one hand, the rich mosaic of religions and ethnicities that has characterized Arab societies for thousands of years is being recast in favor of unitary homogeneity. The forced exile of the Yezidis, Christians, Shabak, and other ethnic and religious communities from the plains of Iraq are but one example. On the other hand, these population movements are reshaping the countries where people are fleeing to, namely Lebanon, Jordan, and Tunisia.

Within countries, regional and domestic responses to political grievances are fueling societal polarization on a scale not witnessed before. In Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and other countries, the political process is subjugated to a virulent form of identity politics that is breaking bonds of trust within societies. Ideological, religious, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal fractures are emerging, resulting in societal scars that may never truly heal.

Second, the legitimacy and authority of Arab states is disintegrating.

The uprisings reflected widespread discontent with prevailing governance systems. The response to these popular movements in a number of countries was a

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mixture of violence and the pushing away of core grievances.

Today, national capitals are under siege with Baghdad, Sana'a, Tripoli and Damascus all losing control over territories to rogue entities. The formal expressions of statehood such as international sovereignty and control over national territory and the instruments of violence—including standing armies—are eroding in the face of alternative organizational structures and entities.

New military non-state actors, particularly the Islamic State, are challenging the idea of the nation state and seeking to construct alternate political realities. New and uncommon models of “state” systems have emerged and these entities are proposing substitute ideas of statehood, identity, and community. This means that existing political elites and ruling parties need to contend with the rise of new political actors including warlords and, more critically, the types of settlements needed to end conflicts are different and less traditional than before.

Countries where state control and territory have not been lost are witnessing either an increased fragmentation in political spheres or a regression to more authoritarian rule. While the exponential increase in new political parties and civil society organizations in countries like Tunisia can herald a more democratic future, the wider disengagement

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from political processes, particularly among the youth, can threaten this future. And in countries like Egypt, civic liberties and basic rights are trampled on in the name of national security and the fight against extremism. This profound regression in democratic rule will only amplify societal fissures and may drive increasingly vocal citizens to seek alternative options to voice dissent.

Third, there is a strong sense of individual empowerment sweeping through Arab countries.

The profound psychological effect of the popular uprisings and the toppling of regimes is yet to be fully understood. However, one clear outcome is the greater personal belief of Arab citizens in their own ability to affect change and make a difference in their lives. The astonishing array of civic initiatives undertaken across the region positively reflect this sense of empowerment. But on the negative side, the empowerment is evident in the growing militarization of youth dissatisfied with current governments.

Mounting brutality inflicted by governments and the closure of all spaces for dissent across different Arab countries are leaving Arab citizens, particularly the youth, with dwindling options to affect change. Perhaps the most virulent manifestation of this sense of empowerment is the Islamic State. Despite an abhorrent agenda and violent

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tactics, for a large number of the region's youth, it is the only entity offering an alternative future that they can be a part of building.

The negative consequences of these three trends will continue until Arab governments and elites identify ways to rebuild their relationships with citizens. Countering the ill effects requires a return to the drawing board. Governments must work with civil actors to map out new, inclusive political systems that revamp institutions and decentralize power structures, reinstate citizenship rights, uphold and cherish societal diversity, harness societal creativity, and address long-held grievances.

This is paramount for a region seeking a brighter future and for winning over a youthful population that feels like it only has two choices: perish under authoritarian regimes or join a new violent entity.

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