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Issue Brief

Regional Threats in the Middle East and their Implications for Pakistan

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The Arab Spring¹ which began in 2010 was supposed to be a springboard for change in the troubled Arab states stretching from Middle East to North Africa, but it fizzled out without making much of a difference in the lives of the Arab people. All of these states have serious problems with governance, rule of law, security, and finding a balance between religion and secularism. In 2016, the Middle East, as much as ever, is the focus of international attention, due to the various crises erupting all across the region. The revolution of the Arab Spring has evolved into a major security threat for the region and the world as a whole. The recent troubles in the region can trace their roots back to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was the next logical step for the Americans on the War on Terror after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks.² Each state in the region has a different mix of civil problems and successes, but the overall outline of events is driven by a mix of broad and enduring challenges in governance, demographics, economics, religion, and social change taking place in the region currently.³ Sectarian, ethnic, and tribal differences have increasingly become institutionalised and a growing source of tension and conflict, over time.

The War on Terror of today is quite different from that of 2003, and instead of bringing peace to the already fractured region, has brought in more misery, chaos and instability. Spreading like a wildfire, it engulfed the states of Libya, Syria and Yemen, and out of it has emerged a bigger behemoth in the shape of a new extremist outfit, the Islamic State (IS).⁴ The IS which is based in the states of Syria and Iraq, and has carried out more heinous acts than ever heard or seen before. Failed secularism and social and economic stability, coupled with provision of effective governance, has helped push significant populace in the Arab world towards religious extremism. The expansion of the IS has galvanised an unlikely coalition of foreign militaries, to overcome the current threat. The Middle East, North Africa, and much of the Islamic world are caught up in an interlocking pattern of crises that have become steadily more serious over time.

The blunted ambitions of the Arab Spring and ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen have had serious international repercussions. Oman is another state waiting to become a flashpoint due to failing health of Sultan Qaboos, who also does not have a legitimate heir. The Sultanate weathered the Arab Spring protests, but there are persistent grumblings in the long-marginalised governorate of Dhofar and other peripheral areas. Much of Oman's ability to manage this dissent was due to the Sultan's personal legitimacy, and the influx of Saudi money after 2011.⁵ Arab Spring ushered an era of great uncertainty and instability in the Gulf state of Bahrain's by directly challenging the dynamic of the state, which

confronted its stability on the grounds of sectarianism due to the majority of the populace being of Shia faith while the monarchy was Sunni. This uprising was crushed by the Saudi army which entered into Bahrain on the request of Bahrain's ruling elite to put an end to the protests over there in 2011.⁶ On top of this the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to smoulder in the background with no resolution within sight. So much instability and insecurity in the region has provided space for the extremist propaganda to fester, and the world of today is more at risk than it was in 2001, with deadly attacks across Europe and the Muslim world becoming a norm and thereby providing a breeding ground for extremist growth on both sides of the divide.

The economic consequences arising out of the conflict in the Middle East are quite significant. Conflicts have driven up inflation, weakened fiscal and financial positions, caused deep recessions and damaged institutions. Much of the productive capital in the battle torn regions has been destroyed, personal wealth and income losses have been enormous, and human capital has deteriorated with the lack of jobs and education. Within the region, more than 20 million people have been displaced, and a further 10 million have been rendered as refugees.⁷ In addition to tragic loss of life and physical destruction, war and internal strife in countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have intensified already high levels of poverty and unemployment. Furthermore, pushing these countries into fragility and eradicating previous development gains for a whole set of generation. War has left deep marks on economies of the Middle Eastern states. According to the World Bank, it would take these states more than 20 years just to rebound to their 2010 pre-conflict GDP levels.⁸ The impact of conflicts is not confined to national borders, as there are significant spill-overs to neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, which itself is trying to improve its economic growth after suffering from a decade of war against terrorism and radicalisation.

The challenge of religious extremism, sectarian violence, and the fight for the future of Islam may currently be centered in the Middle East, but it is increasingly having a broader impact on the larger Islamic world, and on outlier countries like Pakistan.

Pakistan is strong enough to ward off much of the destabilising debris coming its way from its western neighbourhood. Also, any attempt by IS or its affiliates to make significant inroads in the country, is unlikely to become a potent threat as in Iraq or Syria. Nevertheless, problems of economic deprivation, political repression, and poor governance mean that religious radicalisation will remain an issue, as it provides sympathy among the radicalised elements, which can prove to be a destabilising factor for the

state. IS has recruited fighters from Europe, the US, Arab world and the Caucasus, while some militant organisations from Pakistan are also believed to have joined its ranks and have sworn allegiance to it. This will provide further evidence to the states who want Pakistan to be declared as a State sponsoring terrorism, leading to further isolation on the international stage.

On the domestic front, this could emerge as another menace for the security apparatus to deal with, which already has its hands full with the ongoing counter-terrorism operations. The crisis in the Middle East has created an additional challenge for Pakistan in the form of a polarised public opinion. For a country, which, despite facing a host of internal security challenges, is still evolving a common national narrative, further polarisation becomes a particularly serious challenge. Despite its multiple engagements, Pakistan has been careful not to immerse itself in the volatile political dimensions of the Middle East. It has stayed away from militarily engaging itself in the various conflicts in the region. Instead, it has chosen to keep a low profile and to present its role as a helper and negotiator, particularly in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran tensions.

The crisis in the Middle East can threaten Pakistan's economic development in two ways: by threatening the flow of remittances from oil-rich Gulf States into Pakistan; and by exacerbating the security situation through radical and sectarian tendencies in Pakistan. Pakistan's policy makers should, therefore, earnestly commit themselves to devising and implementing strategies to deal with the challenges being posed.⁹ Such strategies ought to be formulated keeping in view all aspects of the problem. Pakistan's foreign policy also has a role to play in its struggle against violent radicalisation, and it should proactively take up such issues at diplomatic forums. More importantly, Pakistan should focus on broader economic, governance and security sector reforms.

In its counter-terrorism efforts, the military enjoys support of all segments of society and the state institutions. On the other hand, the National Action Plan (NAP) is a comprehensive counter-terrorism plan that adopts a multi-pronged strategy, from execution of convicted terrorists to banning hate speech and choking financial sources of terrorism, to eradicate extremism from Pakistan.¹⁰ If followed in letter and spirit, NAP also provides an effective means to deal with the forthcoming challenges. Pakistan should also focus on building capacities of its internal security apparatus to enable them to deal with an increasing array of threats challenging its domestic security. Pakistan's socio-political and security context reveals that while IS appeal among radical elements in Pakistan cannot be ruled out,¹¹ the presence of a strong government and a powerful military, both committed to and capable of countering

terrorism, makes the fears of IS establishing a foothold in the country seem fictional. But same cannot be said about sectarianism. Though having had a history of militancy fuelled by ethnic, political and religious factors, Pakistan has shown its ability to defeat such forces. The recent successes achieved in fighting against militant violence in Baluchistan, Karachi and FATA are ample proof of state's commitment and ability to counter violent extremism.

Pakistan should use the recent economic window of opportunity afforded by the remittances windfall and CPEC-related investment to better its overall economic progress. The Middle East's position as China's bridge between Asia and Europe is a critical part of the Chinese government's plan to construct a New Silk Road as a centrepiece of its economic policy.¹² Coupled with China's evolving economic interests in the region, its growing soft power diplomacy and its new sense of confidence assuming a voice on regional affairs, efforts by Pakistan can succeed only when the country has its own compelling national narrative which guides all its national efforts, economic growth and development.

Notes and References:

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