

Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)

Joint Staff/J39

Assessment of Strategic Implications of Population Dynamics in the Central Region

Integration Report: State-Level Instability in the Gulf and Levant

Research Team Reports

Available at <https://nsiteam.com/sma-publications/>

- Aviles, W., Rieger, T., & Goncharova, A. (February 2020). **Assessing buffers and drivers of conflict in the Arab Gulf**. NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Hinck, R., Ehrl, M., Stefansim, W., Kitsch, S., Cooley, A., & Cooley, S. (February 2020). **Media reporting on Egypt's economy and bailout narratives: The role of Egyptian, Chinese, and Russian media narratives in solving Egypt's economic crisis**. Oklahoma State University & Monmouth College Media Ecology and Strategic Analysis (MESA) Group [Report](#).
- Jafri, A. & Goncharova, A. (February 2020). **Regime collapse in Syria: Expectations and implications**. NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Lee, H. & Roth, N. (March 2020); TRADOC G-2 Modeling & Simulation Directorate. **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia futures study with an assessment of Syrian refugee camp radicalization dynamics**. TRADOC G-2 [Report](#).
- Liebl, V. (March 2020). **Oman succession crisis 2020**. SMA Invited Perspective [Report](#).
- Peterson, N., Rieger, T., & Astorino-Courtois, A. (March 2020). **Potential paths to instability in Jordan**. NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Polansky, S., & Peterson, N. (February 2020). **Stability in US-Egyptian relations: Why the United States is unlikely to make a major policy shift in response to Egyptian events**. NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).
- Polansky, S. & Aviles, W. (February 2020). **US action and inaction in Lebanon: Charting the best course for US interests in great power competition**. NSI, Inc. Reachback [Report](#).

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State-Level Instability in the Gulf and Levant

At the request of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), SMA initiated a study to understand the strategic implications of destabilizing population dynamics within the Central Region. The effort examined drivers of instability in the region emerging from radicalization, great power competition, state-level instability, and black swan scenarios. This report integrates the research conducted by the teams listed on the front cover in response to USCENTCOM's questions about state-level instability in the Gulf and Levant.¹ This report is intended to be a succinct, easily navigable representation of the exceptional work by the collective team. Please click on the links embedded in the report to go directly to the research reports.

Top-Level Findings

Implicit in USCENTCOM's Gulf and Levant questions is a sense of inevitable cataclysm. This is typified by assumptions of worsening conflict, diplomatic ruptures, and regime change or collapse. The reports prepared in response to these questions suggest that such an outcome is not preordained. Coupled with drivers that threaten to further mire the region in chaos, there exist buffers against cataclysm. Instability itself does not mean regime collapse is inevitable or even likely across the region. While instability remains a constant in the region, the natural endpoint to that instability is not anarchic failure. Moreover, that Russia and China are seeking different outcomes than the United States does not imply that they are seeking anarchic collapse. In fact, no great powers' interests are served by regional conflagration.

Drivers Toward Chaos

Despite the existence of buffers against cataclysm, there are significant phenomena that are threatening to mire the region in chaos. These include dissatisfaction with governance and policies, faltering economies, military activities, and regional competition.

Dissatisfaction with Governance and Policies

Despite superficial acceptance of the ruling elites across the region, meaningful cleavages exist between the public, governance capability, and pursued policies. While the Jordanian citizenry is generally supportive of King Abdullah II, his closeness and security dependence on the United States and Israel makes him vulnerable to those countries' political whims (Peterson, Rieger, & Astorino-Courtois). In Jordan, there are severe governance shortfalls that have heightened public frustration with the regime. Meanwhile, in Lebanon, ongoing protests

¹ USCENTCOM Questions:

[A1] What events in Egypt (protests, military coup) could result in the US reacting with severe policy shifts and mil-mil restrictions? As a result, would the Government of Egypt degrade or deny current access, basing, and overflight (ABO) agreements?

[A2] If the Egyptian economy continues to fail, which great power will lead bail out efforts?

[A3] What would be the strongest catalyst leading to a civil war/revolt in Jordan? Will His Majesty King Abdullah (HMKA) and his tribal affiliates be able to contain the level of violence? Who/what would succeed HMKA? How would a civil war/revolt impact the broader region?

[A4] What pressure point would cause Jordan to permanently stop cooperating on security, border, and economic issues with Israel?

[A5] What would Syria look like with a total regime collapse? What leader/entity would take control if the regime collapses?

[A6] What is the US reaction to a government collapse in Lebanon? What US actions could cause Lebanon to fall into Russia's orbit?

[A7] What happens if there is a revolt in the House of Saud? What happens if there is a collapse of the House of Saud? Will Wahhabi clerics seize/attempt to seize control? Do Saudi forces (especially SANG) stay loyal?

[A8] What would be the likely result of an internal power struggle in Oman after Sultan Qaboos dies?

[A9] What would cause the Qatar-Quartet rift to turn into a military conflict? How would the US and other great powers react?

represent an unprecedented level of public dissatisfaction with the political system (Polansky & Aviles). Additionally, successive governments in Lebanon are seen as corrupt and illegitimate, leading some protesters to demand an end to the cloistered political system that has tenuously governed the country for generations. In Saudi Arabia, despite a lack of support for opposition power centers such as Wahhabi clerics, the pace of reform can be a source of vulnerability for rulers (Lee & Roth). Lee and Roth note that Mohammad bin Salman’s leadership could be threatened if the reform agenda promised in Vision 2030 is implemented too swiftly and recklessly. A key demographic influencing the implementation of this agenda is the ‘disgruntled youth.’ This group can either be persuaded by the promise of prosperity under the Vision 2030 plan or empower popular support for oppositionists pursuing more traditional standards. However, it is pertinent to note that even in the event of a revolt, it is unlikely that the House of Saud would cede control to an individual or entity outside of the royal family (Lee & Roth).

Refugee/IDP Policies

The challenges of managing the refugee and IDP crisis in the region by governments is a source of tension between citizens and regimes in power. The strain put on host governments by refugee inflows and IDPs also presents a possible cleavage in public support for those in power. In the case of Jordan, for example, the inflow of people has contributed to an increase in poverty and a rise in the unemployment rate, and has put additional strain on Jordan’s already-stretched social services (Peterson et al.). In Syria, the controversial Law No. 10 has been dubbed as a “legal veneer on an Assad land grab,” as it represents an effort by the regime to retake land vacated by IDPs and refugees (Jafri & Goncharova).

Faltering Economies

The teetering economic systems of many states in the region present a critical vulnerability. Jordan’s “small” and “structurally weak” economy is a major vulnerability for the Hashemite regime (Peterson et al.). Additionally, financial crisis has roiled not only Lebanon, but also its neighbors. Syria has been decimated by economic degradation, plummeting foreign exchange reserves, and central bank mismanagement (Jafri & Goncharova). Lebanon’s recent sovereign default—the first in the country’s history—is a window into the economic turmoil that has plagued the country.² Its national debt-to-GDP ratio is one of the highest in the world, and the value of its currency has plummeted against the US dollar (Polansky & Aviles). The Egyptian economy is also under tremendous strain (Hinck, Ehrl, Stefansim, Kitsch, Cooley, & Cooley). Media reports from Egypt, Russia, and China all indicate that the Egyptian economy is likely to continue faltering. Despite an increase in reporting suggesting greater capacity from the Egyptian government to handle the economy, there are also mixed reports of public support for its policies (Hinck et al.).

Military Activities

Actor interests are also being furthered by various military activities in the region, many of which are potentially destabilizing. In the Arabian Gulf, Qatar’s opposing position with respect to fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members in conflicts taking place in Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Syria presents the possibility of militarization in the intra-GCC conflict (Aviles, Rieger, & Goncharova). Additionally, Iran, Turkey, and Russia are all seeking to advance their security cooperation with Qatar, further escalating the Gulf dispute (Aviles et al.). In

² The Economist. (2020, March 12). For the first time, Lebanon defaults on its debts. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/03/12/for-the-first-time-lebanon-defaults-on-its-debts>.

Syria, Russian and Iranian military activities warrant closer examination. The two states are strongly resolved against a regime collapse, as the chaos that would accompany it serves neither's interests. However, their activities in continuing support to the Assad regime, politicizing aid distribution, and inflicting human rights violations on the Syrian people are themselves great destabilizers to the region. The role of US military activities also represents a potential driver to regional chaos; Lee and Roth, for example, highlight popular dissatisfaction with the indefinite US military presence on the Arabian peninsula.³

Regional Competition

Internal regional competition threatens to further push the region towards cataclysm. In the Gulf, Qatar, long dissatisfied with its status as a "junior partner" within the GCC construct, has been exerting outsized influence, frustrating and stymying its regional rivals (Aviles et al.). Relatedly, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is liable to escalate to military confrontation, particularly if Saudi Arabia continues to perceive overt threats from Iran to its regional hegemonic status. There are also conflicts in the region that serve as arenas for great power competition, such as Syria, where Russian and US interests have come at odds. There, Russian and Turkish interests have often intersected as well. Despite an uneasy ceasefire in October between the two states, Turkey remains skeptical about Russia's ties with Kurdish elements (Jafri & Goncharova).

Buffers Against Cataclysm

The regional picture in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR) is highly volatile; however, that does not mean a cataclysm is inevitable. There are several phenomena that serve as buffers against this outcome. These buffers consist of both regional and global actor interests, as well as the capacity and resilience of regimes. Peterson, Rieger, and Astorino-Courtois identify a "network of sources of resilience" to instability in Jordan, a concept also applicable on a regional scale as well.

Interests of Neighboring States

Regional actors are generally averse to further chaos. Jafri and Goncharova indicate that Iran is deeply committed to the survival of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Though Iran's actions in propping up the Assad regime incur deep and sustained costs to the Syrian people, they serve as a buffer against the chaos and anarchy that would result from regime collapse (Jafri & Goncharova). Additionally, many of the regional states' interests would be undermined by regime collapses generally. A violent uprising in Jordan, for example, would benefit only violent non-state actors in Jordan, and this would present a significant security threat to Gulf states who are already battling such groups (Peterson et al.).

Gulf states have strong preferences against regional cataclysm. In the case of Egypt, for whom revenues from, and access to, the Suez Canal are critically important, both the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have a strong desire to keep access to Egypt's Suez Canal non-politicized⁴ (Polansky & Peterson). Within the Gulf, there remains a desire to maintain solidarity, and cooperate on a sub-regional level, despite internecine rivalries periodically escalating. For example, despite its recent tensions with the self-proclaimed Anti-Terror Quartet

³ "Population satisfaction declines across all civilian groups if US forces remain deployed indefinitely in control of the oil producing region and resources of Saudi Arabia" (Lee & Roth).

⁴ The Suez Canal is a source of hard US currency that is a critical supplement to the military aid that the United States provides to Egypt (Polansky & Peterson).

(Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt), Qatar would prefer to resolve rifts with the Quartet and its fellow GCC members within the framework of the GCC, rather than resort to military escalation. A resolution therein would diminish tensions and promote regional stability (Aviles et al.).

Great Power Interests

Beyond regional states striving for stability and calm in the region, great powers are also resolved against total collapse. Despite vastly different interests among the United States, Russia, and China, none of the great powers seek, or benefit from, a complete breakdown of order. Chinese interests that are largely economic in nature rely on secure and stable conditions. Meanwhile, Russian interests that are characterized more by industry-specific or targeted objectives (Hinck et al.) may have a higher tolerance for baseline instability, but are not served by regime collapse in any state.

One indicator of a preference for stability is the desire to preserve existing relationships, such as those between the United States and regional partners (e.g., Egypt and Lebanon). For example, the US-Egypt relationship has survived several periods of Egyptian disorder that included large-scale protests, an Islamist government, and a volatile leadership transition that ushered in the regime of current president Mohammad Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi—without any major US policy shifts toward Egypt (Polansky & Peterson). Interest in preserving this relationship is also shared by Egypt, which would in most cases act to sustain its relationship with the US; however, a permanent reduction of military aid could prompt a reactionary reduction in access, basing, and overflight (ABO) privileges from Cairo⁵ (Polansky & Peterson). In Lebanon, majority expert opinion suggests that continued United States support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) is an indication of the United States' commitment to sovereignty and stability in the region. This is because the LAF can act as a bulwark against Hezbollah.⁶

Military access is also an important concern for great powers. Russian access to airbases and a naval resupply depot in Tartous activates much of its concern for the preservation of the Assad regime (Jafri & Goncharova). Relatedly, as discussed above, ABO agreements between the United States and Egypt are likely to continue and would be vulnerable only in the event of permanent US reduction of funds to Egypt. In the Gulf, the al-Udaid Air Force Base in Qatar is a strong tether to the United States' interest in maintaining stability in the region, especially since it serves as an indispensable hub for US operations in the USCENTCOM AOR. In addition to Qatar, other Gulf nations similarly seek to preserve their defense relationships with the United States (Aviles et al.).

Distinguishing between political, military, and economic interests is particularly difficult in the Central region, where the geography itself is a global commons with enormous implications for all manner of interests. Such is the case in the Suez Canal and the Arabian Gulf. The Suez Canal maintains strategic importance as a critical chokepoint to access the region (Polansky & Peterson). Similarly, in the Arabian Gulf, the United States seeks to secure the vital shipping lanes that crisscross the region, thus ensuring economic access to the area's natural resources (Aviles et al.). Relatedly, Russia and China each have important economic links with Quartet nations that they would seek to preserve in the event of further militarization in the Gulf (Aviles et al.). Additionally,

⁵ Polansky and Peterson indicate several types of events that could prompt a major shift in United States policy towards Egypt. These include “a) deepening ties between Egypt and Russia, b) violent crackdowns by the Egyptian state, c) coups of a different kind than those seen in the recent past (e.g., coup by junior military officers), d) Egyptian misuse of American weapons, e) an Egyptian violation of its peace treaty with Israel, f) events that bring into question whether Egypt is a friendly and reliable partner, and g) events that fundamentally violate the nature of the US-Egyptian relationship.”

⁶ Polansky and Aviles also highlight a contrasting minority opinion that suggests that continued United States support for the LAF further legitimizes and supports a power structure of which both the LAF and Hezbollah are beneficiaries.

great powers are looking carefully at Egypt, and appear willing to assist in an economic intervention where the opportunity presents itself (Hinck et al.). Specifically, Chinese media reports suggest that China considers itself a suitable bailout partner for Egypt, though Egyptian media reports a preference for Russia as a potential economic savior.⁷ This mirrors a desire for economic calm by great powers in the Gulf, especially in a time when Prince Mohammed bin Salman is seeking to implement its progressive Vision 2030 economic agenda (Lee & Roth).

Survival of Regimes and Power Structures

An additional buffer against cataclysm is the existence of popular support for regimes across the region. In Jordan, there remains a baseline level of satisfaction with the rule of King Abdullah II, who is seen to have been responsive and decisive during protests (Peterson et al.). That is reflective of a broad perception of legitimacy and respect for the Hashemite kingdom among security forces as well as citizens (Ibid). However, regime legitimacy does not necessarily translate to widespread public support of the regime's policies and ability to govern. In cases like Lebanon where regimes enjoy neither legitimacy nor public support there remains some level of stability, granted by the mere survival of the regime, however imperfect (Polansky & Aviles). Liebl, in examining the leadership transition in Oman, identifies strict adherence to Omani basic law, resulting in a seamless transfer of power to from Sultan Qaboos to Haitham bin Tariq. In a society historically-divided along regional lines, there was the possibility of a power struggle after the death of Sultan Qaboos, particularly because there was no clearly-appointed successor before his death (Liebl). However, the adherence to Omani customary law allowed for a peaceful transition.

The lack of support for opposition power centers is also worth examining in this context. Lee and Roth find marked obstacles to potential regime challengers in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, Wahhabi clerics lack the necessary popular support and would be unable to muster sufficient backing from the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) to assume control. Furthermore, the hardline, austere governance that Wahhabi clerics prefer does not compete effectively with the progressive agenda (Vision 2030) that Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is pursuing.

Conclusion

The presumption of inevitable anarchy in the region is countered by the analyses integrated in this report, which suggest that the region, though fragile, is not necessarily bound for breakage. Fears of diplomatic dissolution, financial crisis, militarization, and regime change are tempered by analyses that accept some instability as a constant, but do not see such instability as a waypoint to larger institutional collapse. Popular discontent with current policies should not be taken to imply loss of support for the regime. The region is supported by buffers against cataclysm though plagued by drivers that propel instability. These buffers include the interests of neighboring states, great power preferences for stability, and the survival and promotion of certain regimes and power structures. The drivers towards cataclysm include public dissatisfaction with policies and governance, faltering economies, military activities, and regional competition. Actor interests animate many of the tensions in the region and are thus a useful analogue with which to contextualize the instability therein.

⁷ Hinck et al. indicate that concurrent Egyptian media did not identify China as a likely bailout partner; conversely, Russian media did not indicate a preference to be a bailout partner.