

# **The Political and Social Problems of the Contemporary Middle East and its Neighbouring Areas**

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## **Preface**

The contemporary Middle East is described as an area of tremendous upheaval in the International Relations arena. The first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have especially been seen as a period in which the fragile stability of the Middle East has been under the pressure of indigenous as well as outside factors. The terrorist attack against the United States that took place on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 was a watershed moment for the region. The “War against terror” declared by the then American president, George W. Bush, has practically been implemented in the Middle East. Two Middle Eastern states, Iran and Iraq, were labelled ‘rouge states’ by Bush’s Administration and accused of being sponsors of international terrorist groups. Consequently, the White House decided to remove Saddam Hussein from power by force. However, the American invasion against Iraq negatively influenced not only its security situation but also the entire region. Despite the fact that the gory regime of Saddam Hussein had been removed from power, the U.S. has proven to be unprepared to establish new institutions and state authorities. The internal situation of

Iraq steadily deteriorated. The post-Hussein Iraq was an area of Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict, the old regime's military activities against U.S.-led coalition and many other atrocities. Moreover, the state of political chaos allowed for the development of Al-Kaida in Iraq (AKI). Paradoxically, the American invasion of Iraq led not to a decrease but an increase in terrorist activity in the Middle East. Moreover, terrorist attacks also occurred in other regions of the world – predominantly in Europe but also in parts of Asia. The other important consequence of the Second Gulf War was the strategic activity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Tehran used the situation in post-Saddam Iraq to expand its political influence. The policy of sponsoring radical Shia military and political groups was one of the causes of the notorious lack of internal stability, which in turn, increased the International Coalition's cost of their policy toward Iraq.

At the end of 2010, the Middle East experienced another crisis. The Arab Spring caused crises of an internal, external, political and security nature in the region. The non-democratic and authoritarian regimes were subject to a series of popular revolutionary movements. The origins, course and consequences of the Arab Spring were not uniform in Arab states. Authoritarian rulers of countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen were forced to resign under pressure from popular movements. In some of these states, it caused internal friction in the form of civil war. Nevertheless, the process of political transition may not be regarded as a success. The obvious example of this situation is Egypt. At the beginning of 2011, President Husni Mubarak, under pressure from widespread unrest, had to resign. During the following months political reforms were introduced. Their aim was to establish a new competitive political system. Consequently, the new Constitutional Law enabled the organisation of the first free elections in Egypt. Nevertheless, the political course taken by the victorious Muslim Brotherhood finally led to the next wave of popular unrest and their rule was ended by a military coup. Three years after the fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, the authoritarian rule and influence of the army had been restored. Moreover, the Arab monarchies of the Gulf were able to crush reformist movements without having to initiate changes to their political systems and they were able to avoid internal disruptions. The only state that was able to build a new and relatively democratic political system was Tunisia. The other aspect of the Arab Spring may be observed in the area of international interactions. The chain of events has changed the structure of regional policy and the roles played by external powers. Events such as the civil war in Syria, Libya and Yemen were arenas that saw the creation of new actors, such as the Islamic State, and forced local and global powers to redefine their policies toward MENA. This situation finally led to a new phase in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and enabled the Russia Federation to rebuild its regional influence. Seven years after

the beginning of popular unrest in the Arab States, the internal and external situation of the Middle Eastern remains in flux.

This special issue presents the perspective of the research that focuses on the problems of the contemporary Arab World and other related areas. The most important feature of this volume is its interdisciplinary approach. The papers refer not only to political studies but also represent the areas of culture and social studies. Most of the Authors are research fellows from the Department of the Middle East and North Africa at the University of Lodz. There are also contributors from the University of Warsaw, University of Bialystok in Poland and the University of Padua in Italy. One of the Authors is an independent researcher. The issues taken by the Authors are based in the Arab World but two of the papers are connected with other geographical areas. The topics presented in this special issue are different in their substance nevertheless they possess some common themes such as the influence of the Arab Spring on the local and international situation of the region. They try to establish in what manner this period in the history of the contemporary Middle East has reshaped not only the political scene of the indigenous states and their international position but also the impact it has had on their respective societies.

**Ewelina Waśko-Owsiejczuk** explores the question of the American invasion on Iraq. She focuses her attention not only on the circumstances that influenced the decision of the Bush Administration to put an end to the rule of Saddam Hussein by force. She stated that the “Freedom Agenda” of President George W. Bush for the Middle East assumed that the liberation of Iraq from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and the start of political change would trigger the process of democratization of the entire region. The main point of this article is to show that numerous mistakes made by the American administration meant this action was completely unproductive. After the invasion, Iraq did not become a developing democracy but rather an example of a failing state.

An essay of **Jakub Slawek** looks to shed light on the political and security developments in Yemen that ultimately resulted in the Saudi-led military operation in this country. It discusses the political background behind the Yemeni revolution of 2011, its positive outcome in the shape of the results of the National Dialogue Conference and the reasons for the collapse of the efforts to stabilize Yemen.

In his paper **Robert Czulda** examines the security situation in the sub-region of the Gulf. He discusses the question of the defence dilemma of the GCC states. The main goal of this article is to present and assess the GCC’s threat perception, which is followed by an analysis of the multilateral and unilateral responses. Another aspect of the paper is to assess the degree to which the GCC states are able to establish a joint and effective military bloc within the Persian Gulf which would enable them to improve their security in the face of symmetrical and asymmetrical threats.

**Paulina Warsa** discusses the situation in post-Saddam Iraq. She analyses the question of national identity in a state divided along sectarian lines. To make such an analysis, the concept of the 'Post-Almohad Man' by Malek Bennabi is used. The Author looks at whether the Bennabi's theory is applicable to Iraq to describe its internal problems.

The paper of **Alberto Gasparetto** refers to the area of international relations in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. It discusses the situation in Syria, especially the civil war and its influence on the policy of the regional powers of Turkey and Iran. Gasparetto suggests that after the outbreak of civil war in Syria, the policies of the two regional powers towards the Assad regime were different. Turkey has seen the Syrian official government as an enemy while the Iranian approach was to enable its survival. It could lead to geopolitical rivalry between Ankara and Teheran. Nevertheless, the emergence of ISIS and the activity of Kurdish military groups were the main factors that caused the rapprochement of the two countries. However, after the end of the atrocities in Syria the geopolitical ambitions of Turkey and Iran may lead to future tensions in their bilateral relations.

The article of **Marek Dziekan** discusses the novel *2025. An-Nida al-Akhir* [2025. The Last Call] written by a young Egyptian journalist and writer - Mustafa al-Husayni. The novel was published in early 2011, before the fall of Husni Mubarak in Egypt. It describes a revolution against the regime of Jamal al-Mubarak, son of Husni, spurred on by a group of young Egyptians. The story takes place in 2025 and anticipates the development of the political situation in Egypt and the Middle East between 2011 and 2025 in a utopian/dystopian manner. Alongside *Utopia* by Ahmad Khalid Tawfik and the poetry of Usama al-Abnubi and Abd ar-Rahman al-Abnudi, al-Husayni's book is considered to be a prediction of the Arab Spring in Egypt.

**Blanka Rogowska** explores the question of women's participation in the Arab revolution in Egypt. Her main aim is to describe the influence of the fall of Mubarak regime on the political and social status of women. Rogowska posits that Egyptian women were active participants of the revolution. They were hoping that the change of the political regime would positively change their status inside Egyptian society. The victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in parliamentary and presidential elections disappointed them. This led to them becoming politically active again, this time against President Mursi. Rogowska also analyses the status of women under the Sisi presidency and explains whether the social position of women really improved in comparison to the Mubarak regime

The last two papers geographically extend beyond the region of the Middle East. Their common theme is to take into consideration the relations between the Federation of Russia and the Middle East as well as the Muslim World. **Andrzej Stopczyński** discusses the question of the Russian position towards the Arabs Spring. He suggests that President Putin, as well as the other international leaders, was surprised by the series of events that occurred in the Middle East. After a few

months his administration was able to prepare a solid strategy toward these regional challenges. The conflict in Syria enabled Russia to restore its influence and position of power that may enable it to resolve regional problems in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the Arab Spring was a challenge not only for foreign policy but also the internal policy of the Russia Federation because of the influence on the country's Muslim population, and the dangerous prospect of the emergence of Jihadi movements. Putin's administration was also successful in this field. The steps taken by the Russian Authorities proved to be successful and the danger of the development of Muslim extremism has been overcome.

The essay by **Izabela Kończak** refers to polygyny as one of the most important social issues regarding the civil status of Muslims in the Russia Federation. Since the 1960s, the country's penal code has banned bigamy and polygamy. After Perestroika and the end of communist rule in Russia, this situation remains unchanged. Nevertheless, the rebuilding of the religious aspect of the Muslim population had raised the question of polygyny as part of religious identity. This has caused a contradiction between the religious and civil institutions. This article presents the political and social discourse among the question of polygyny in Russia over recent years.