

## **Waking from the Middle East Nightmare**

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MADRID – The Middle East is caught in a seemingly endless spiral of instability. The possibility of military intervention in Syria, together with the deteriorating situation in Egypt since the army's coup, has placed the region on a razor's edge. Moreover, despite the changes in Iran since its presidential election in June, international negotiations over its nuclear ambitions remain a dead letter.

Paradoxes abound, as the United States's traditional Middle East allies (Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, Egypt, and the Gulf states) have taken opposing – and sometimes seemingly contradictory – positions on the region's key conflicts. And, in all of today's hotspots, the assertion of interests by neighboring or nearby countries has complicated matters further.

Saudi Arabia, fearing severe domestic consequences from the Muslim Brotherhood's empowerment in Egypt, does not want to see an Islamist movement legitimized democratically. So it has taken a consistently harsh position against the Brotherhood, despite the latter being more moderate than the Saudis' own brand of Islam.

Israel, for its part, is exerting pressure in two ways. First, it is supporting the Egyptian coup and international recognition of the military regime, thereby ensuring – it hopes – greater stability along the Sinai border. Second, it is making progress in its negotiations with the Palestinians dependent on events in Egypt and elsewhere in the region, such as Iran. US Secretary of State John Kerry has invested considerable political capital in the revival of peace negotiations, and Israel can use that to its advantage as well.

The civil war in Syria, meanwhile, has inflamed the Sunni-Shia fault line that traverses the entire region, and that defines, for example, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact, while Saudi Arabia opposes elected Islamists in Egypt, it supports insurgent Islamists in Syria, owing entirely to Iran's support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

The Egyptian coup has already proved to have been a mistake. The military seems to be reverting to the governing methods – and even the feared security institutions – of former President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule. Even Mubarak himself has now been released from prison.

The army's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood is more a question of competition for power than of religion. As the only organized force in the country that could seriously challenge the military, the Brotherhood is the greatest threat that the Army faces, as demonstrated by Mohamed Morsi's victory in the election that made him president a year before he was overthrown.

And, on top of it all, the problem posed by Iran's nuclear program remains unresolved. That may not be surprising, given the violence and turmoil elsewhere in the region. But, since Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, took office at the beginning of August, the West, to put it bluntly, has not demonstrated sufficient will to explore possible openings.

That is a grave mistake, because progress in the negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program would create a more propitious climate for resolving the region's other problems. Moreover, the negotiations will now be under the jurisdiction of Iran's presidential administration, which gives Rouhani greater room for maneuver. The new foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, is well known and respected by the leaders of all of the countries participating in the negotiations, and he will assume important responsibilities in any talks that take place.

While caution is certainly in order, the importance of Rouhani's election must be recognized. If a window of opportunity has opened, the West should do everything possible to take advantage of it.

Rouhani, it should be remembered, won a surprising victory in an election with roughly 75% voter turnout, despite expectations of widespread apathy. Rouhani mobilized Iranians by offering a clear program for economic renewal, which hinges on Iran's engagement with the international community – and thus on progress in nuclear negotiations.

Since taking office, Rouhani has responded quickly to the Iranian public's demands. His cabinet, in terms of its members' positions on economic reform and international relations, is one that few observers believed he would be capable of assembling.

Thus, two important steps have been taken: one by the people of Iran, who have shown that they understand the challenges they face, and the other by their new president, who has assembled the best team available to undertake an enormously difficult program.

There is an expression in Iran that applies to the international community: "You can wake only someone who is sleeping, not someone who is pretending to be asleep." Whether Iran's international interlocutors act on the importance of Rouhani's election is a matter of choice, not of ignorance.

In a Middle East so full of uncertainty, a more predictable Iran – one that behaves like a regionally important state, not a destabilizing Shia movement whose ambitions exceed what international law permits – would be in everyone's interest. There can be no path from the Middle East's agony without the participation, commitment, and determination of all parties.