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Comment

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Comment

SUNE PERSSON

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The gist of Dr. Mabro's analysis, I believe, can be condensed into the diagram in Figure 1, where the arrows indicate the direction of influence.

Since I have no objections to this analysis, nor to the major conclusions reached by the author, I will concentrate my comments on five points implicitly or explicitly discussed by Dr. Mabro, namely:

- population growth;
- water resources;
- political instability;
- "fundamentalism;" and
- oil developments,

all issues of overriding importance for the future of the Middle East.

Population Growth

One fundamental problem for most Middle East countries is the tremendous increase in their populations. Though this may well be **the** fundamental problem of the Region, it is a sensitive one to touch due to its religious and political implications.

The bleak facts suggest that the Middle East, along with Sub-Saharan Africa, is recording by far the fastest population growth among major regions in the world:

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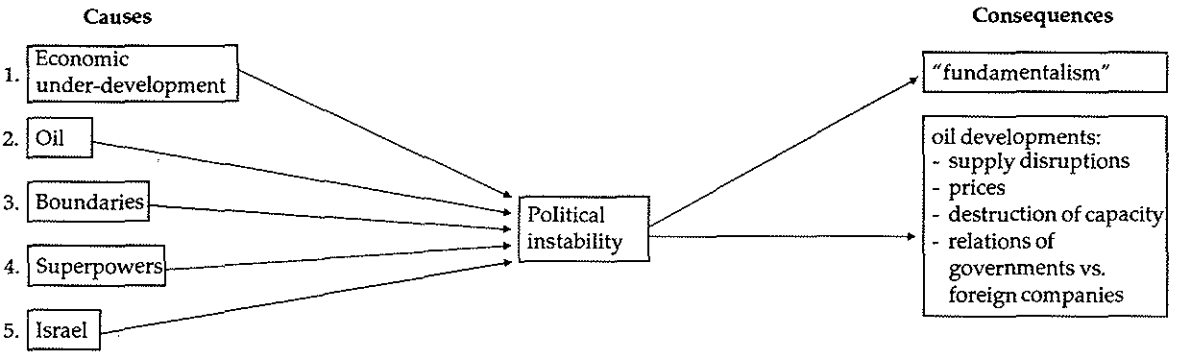
Figure 1



- Egypt, at her first census in 1882, had a population of 6.7 million, in 1917 12.7 million, in 1960 26 million and in 1976 36.6 million. The present figure is often given as 60 million inhabitants.
- The Palestinians were, according to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, 1.2 million in 1946; recent PLO estimates put the figure at 5 million. The Palestinians sometimes complain that they are the victims of genocide. In fact, their number has quadrupled over the past 44 years.
- Syria's population in 1948 was 3 million, a census in 1981 indicated 9.1 million, while the estimates in 1990 gave a number of 12 million Syrians. Again, we find a population quadrupled in 42 years, or doubling in 21 years. The official figure for Syria's population growth is 3.4%, unofficial estimates arrive at 3.7 or 3.8%.
- Iran's official censuses came up with 18.9 million in 1956, 33.7 million in 1976 and 45.8 million in 1986. Iranian newspapers in 1991 calculate 60 million Iranians. The official population growth rate is given as 3.8%, among the highest in the world. The Iranian population has doubled every 20 years (or less). In year 2021, (i.e. year 1400 a.H.S., the Islamic calendar being used in Iran), according to Iranian demographers, the country's population will stand at 160 million! The World Bank, being less sanguine, believes that this number will be reached some five years later.

Now, imagine a Middle East in 20 years' time, i.e., in the year 2011, with a population *doubled!* Already now, to quote Dr. Mabro, "governments are becoming increasingly unable to manage their economy."

Water Resources

The most important natural resource in the Middle East, seen from the point of view of its own population, is water, not oil. And while oil is plentiful in this region, water is a scarce resource. It is also depletable, especially the ground water.

In Israel, the water experts have for decades been warning against the over-consumption of water. They have been pointing to the risks of salination in consequence of a continued lowering of the ground water table. Still, in October 1991, the Israeli Water Commissioner has indicated his intention to allow the pumping of water from Lake Kinneret (Israel's main water reservoir), in spite of the fact that its water is now below the critical red-line level, just to ensure the supply of drinking water in Haifa.

When visiting Cyprus in June 1991, I found the Greek Cypriots already importing water from mainland Greece. One can easily imagine what the water situation was like in October 1991, before the coming of the winter rains.

Syria and Iraq have protested against Turkey's building of the gigantic Atatürk Dam in southeastern Turkey, which will affect the water level (already problematic) in the river of Euphrates.

And Egypt, with its exploding population

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masses, is of course entirely dependent on Nile water.

Assuming a doubling of Middle Eastern populations over the next 20 years, and constant water resources (at best), we will find the population/water ratio worsened by a factor of two by year 2011!

Political Instability

Given the increased pressure from exploding populations, it is hard to perceive that some of the present regimes in the Middle East will survive the coming two decades. Since the fundamental cause of political instability is economic underdevelopment, as lucidly demonstrated by Dr. Mabro, one can also forecast that the future will bring real revolutions, catapulted by mass revolts. These should be clearly distinguished from the so-called revolutions by the Free Officers in Egypt in 1952, by the Baathists in Syria and Iraq in the 1960s, or by Qaddafi in Libya in 1969. All these so-called revolutions were, in fact, merely coups d'état, carried out by small groups of young officers. What we now foresee is revolutions of the Iranian 1979 style.

"Fundamentalism"

If these are the prospects, who will benefit from the future upheavals in the Middle East? What political forces can bring about, manipulate and take control of the anticipated mass revolts?

In the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and into the 1980s, the "West" saw the threat coming from what was called "the Left:" Communists, Nasserists, Baathists. In the 1990s, the Left will be no main revolutionary force. The present, and future, threat is labelled "fundamentalism," or Islamic fundamentalism, to be more precise.

Some of the Mid-Eastern countries have seen democratic elections take place during the 1980s. Out of Egypt's fairly democratic election in 1987 came an opposition, dominated by the Muslim Brethren. Although boycotting the 1990 elections, the Muslim Brethren, now working outside the parliamentary political structure, are still the main opposition against the Mubarak regime.

Jordan had amazingly free and democratic elections in 1989. The sensational winner was the Bloc of Muslim Brethren and other Islamists, together conquering 34 seats out of 80 in Jordan's Lower House of Parliament. Since then, they are the main, and very vocal, opposition against King Hussain.

In Algeria, recent elections saw the omnipotent ruling party, the FNL, heavily defeated by the well-organized Islamic Salvation Front.

The main threat to present-day conservative, pro-Western regimes in the region thus seems to come from Islamic fundamentalists. Islamic revolutions, like the one in Iran, will, for sure, have dramatic political and social consequences for the Middle East. Their direct effects on oil, however, might be less penetrating.

Oil Developments

When analyzing the **direct** consequences on oil from Islamic takeovers, we can benefit from the experiences of the Iranian revolution. There is no reason to fear a destruction of oil capacity or purposeful efforts to disrupt supply. New regimes will be as dependent on their oil export incomes as their predecessors. (Maybe even more — if they are serious in their promises to improve the life of al-Mustadafin, the "Oppressed of the Earth").

The new regimes will probably take over foreign companies but this will have little consequence for oil, because the oil sector has long since been in national hands. The new Islamic regimes will probably be oil price maximizers.[1] However, the success of the (new) price maximizers will not depend on their political will but on the market conditions. The Iranians have not been successful in their aim to steer oil prices. The potential success in this respect, of course, depends on what countries we are discussing. If one or several of the oil cartel core countries turn into Islamic-revolutionary price mazimizers, then we will have an entirely new situation.

The **indirect** consequences of Islamic political

1 / See paper by J.M. Griffin in this volume.

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takeovers could be much more dramatic and sinister. Judging from the Iranian experiences, Islamic republics breed internal warfare. We can already observe domestic violence on its rise in Algeria, orchestrated by the Islamic Salvation Front, and the same occurs, on a smaller scale, in Egypt. Syria was in a large-scale civil war until 1982, when the Assad regime crushed the revolt by the Syrian Muslim Brethren in Hama.

Islamic republics also seem to breed inter-state warfare, being seen (rightfully) as threats to the neighbouring non-fundamentalist regimes. The Iranian revolution was a factor behind the eight years of warfare with Iraq, its sequel being the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the Gulf War of 1991.

This kind of domestic and inter-state warfare has resulted in the destruction of oil capacity in Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait, and has led to oil supply disruptions from the very same countries. Clearly, if such calamities strike one or several of the cartel core countries, substantial oil price increases are bound to ensue.

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