Assessment on the New Round of Middle East Turbulence

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Abstract: After several years’ unrest, “turbulence” becomes the main characteristic of current Middle East situation. Firstly, democracy transformation fails to pave a new way for the Middle East states, and these states have to continue to search for a suitable governance model in the future; Secondly, gamble of regional power emerges as a New Cold War, which is “geopolitics competition plus sectarian conflict”. Thirdly, the rise of “Islamic State” shakes the basis of regional system. Finally, US’s existing plan is disrupted and faces a dilemma. In the near future, the Middle East will come into a period of turbulence.

Key Words: Middle East; Governance Model; Regional Gamble; US Foreign Strategy

Several years since the upheaval in the Middle East, the old pattern of Middle East politics has been completely broken, and there are signs of systemic collapse. Currently, democratic transition in the Middle East has almost failed, the prospect of exploring state governance model is in the gloom. Regional game is colored increasingly with religious features, with the characteristics of “geopolitical scramble plus sectarian conflict” becoming obvious. The Islamic State’s rise has undermined the foundation of the regional order. The established strategic plan of the United States is interrupted and the US is facing dilemma in the Middle East. In the foreseeable

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future, it is difficult to establish a new order in the Middle East, and the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East will become the “new normal” status.

I. The Democratic Transition in the Middle East Failed to Save the Countries, and there will be a Long Way to Explore the Governance Model

Since the upheavals in the Middle East, the Arab world’s domestic politics has changed dramatically. If we say that the year of 2011 was the “regime change” period, 2012 was “democratic transition”, and 2013 was the “alienation transition period”, then 2014 was the “increased volatility period”. Before the upheaval in the Middle East, stability and development in the Middle East countries were mainly maintained by strongman politics. Nevertheless, the long-term accumulation of internal contradictions coupled with Western penetration and push, finally resulting in the collapse of Tunisia, Egypt and other authoritarian regimes, and the start of “democratization” process. However, to treat the “democratization” as the Holy Grail of a strong and wealthy country is not an exercise in “wishful thinking”. As a result, the democratic transition failed to save the Middle East.

From a political perspective, whether the political system emphasizes “authoritarian” or “separation of powers” depends on the stage of development of the country and its main task. As developing countries are faced with a number of tasks, they generally are governed under autocrats. Arab countries are facing more complex issues than that in other countries, and therefore need to ensure a centralized and strong government. It is not difficult to understand why the strongman politics and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have long prevailed. In 2011, the Middle East experienced the downfall of the regime of strongman politics. Its drawbacks are not really the “totalitarian” per se, but that the authorities betray the people, so that the public authority becomes powerful tools for profits
of the elites. Therefore, to solve this problem, after seizing power, they should replace “counter-revolutionary dictatorship” with the “revolutionary dictatorship”, rather than transferring from “totalitarian” to “decentralized”. The Emphasis on the separation of powers, multi-party competition, and democratic rights of the individual is just based on the expense of efficiency. In other words, the democratic transformation in the Middle East is a process that sacrifices centralization and makes the “kitchen knife” blunt. The inevitable result is political instability and deteriorated security situation. Before the upheavals in the Middle East, Arab rulers were firmly in control of the army, police and other law enforcement departments. They have the ability to provide “public goods” such as security and stability for the people. With the collapse of authoritarian regimes and the start of democratization, the relevant countries are facing internal political friction, and the new issue of power vacancy, as well as worsening security situation. In just four years, Egypt had experienced the change of government twice. In particular, in July 2013, the military overthrew the government and strongly repressed the Muslim brotherhood, leading to unprecedented intense conflicts between religious and secular powers. Extremists occupied the Sinai Peninsula as a base, frequently attacking the police. After the fall of the Gaddafi regime, in Libya, there emerged over 1,700 armed militias. These forces are in mutual constraints and conquest, leading to Twists and Turns in political transition. Moreover, currently in the country, there exists a situation of “two parliaments and two Prime Ministers”. The constitutional president elections were again postponed. Since Hardy government came to power, Yemen has never got rid of the spread of terrorism, economic collapse, the rise of separatism and other issues. In September 2014, the Houthi rebel in the North occupied the capital Sana’a, and then occupied the presidential palace in January 2015; thus the government was in a standstill. Syrian political unrest has evolved into a full civil war, and continued to today, causing more than 100,000 deaths. Only in 2014, there were 76,000 people killed alone, according to a record for the past few years.
Tunisia is under relatively smooth transition, but also traps in complicated situations that various political forces are competing, during which two opposition leaders were assassinated, and the change of the interim government happened three times.

From an economic perspective, to improve the economic situation is an important purpose of the Arab revolutions, but the root cause of the “Arab syndrome” lies in a number of structural problems. In order to bail out these countries, there is a need to fully reform on the existing class structure and political and economic development path. However, the democratic transition and the relations of production change are actually incompatible. If you want to really improve people’s livelihood, as well as economic and social equality, it is necessary to forcibly break the privilege of existing top class, and change unreasonable social relations of production. While to accomplish these tasks, there will be a need for strongman ruling and highly centralized governance; if you want to implement a constitutional democracy, the premise is that you must recognize the rationality and legitimacy of the existing political and economic order, and not to fundamentally change the existing economic and class structure. In other words, democratic transition is not only unable to resolve the structural problems of Arab countries, but also hinders real changes, which determines that the transition to democracy in the Middle East is bound to be in “blossom, never getting fruit”.

From a practical perspective, the lack of fundamental action, coupled with political instability, has made the country’s economic situation even worse. Egypt’s foreign exchange reserves fell from $36 billion before the upheaval to $16 billion-$17 billion. Its total debt amounted to $240 billion. Only the interest payment was up to $28.2 billion per annum. Its international credit rating was lowered five times. The Egyptian society stepped backwards at least 15 to 20 years (Goldman, D., 2013: May 30). Libya turned from the richest countries in Africa to a semi-failed state. As of September 2014, armed conflicts led to 250,000 people running away from their homes, and more than 10,000 people fled the country (Guzman, T., 2014: October 31). The
country’s oil exports in 2013 dropped to less than 10 percent of its production capacity. In 2014, its oil production was almost completely stopped (Chengu, G., 2014: October 19). Tunisia used to be one of the “Excellent Economies in Africa” but after the upheaval, its economy has been in constant decline. Its GDP growth fell from 3.6% in 2010 to 2.3%-2.5% in 2014; the unemployment rate increased from 13% in 2010 to the current 15%. Syrian economy is seriously weakened, according to statistics; it will take at least 30 years for the Syrian economy to return to the 2010’s level (Srour, R., 2013: November 8). In short, the democratic transition did not bring prosperity and stability to the Middle East countries, but lead to serious deterioration of the political and economic decay, and more failure or semi-failed states. The exploration of Governance model in Middle East is trapped in a dilemma.

So far, the Arab world has tried almost all the development paths (capitalism, socialism and Islamism) in the world, as well as various political systems (authoritarian regime, the monarchy, and parliamentary democracy), but has not yet found a suitable development model. Since 2011, upheaval in the Middle East and the subsequent start of the democratic transition have indicated that the Arab countries are being treated “democratization” as the best hope for achieving national rejuvenation. However, with the “Arab Spring” turned into “Arab Winter”, the exploration of Arab world governance model lost its “Light of Hope” again. In this context, the Arab countries are forced to re-explore the governance model.

There were two new trends among transition countries in the Middle East. One is the return to the “strongman politics”. In Tunisia, where the earliest outbreak of the “Arab Spring” occurred, the people began to miss the Ben Ali era. On October 23, 2014, during the Constituent Assembly elections, although Beji Caid el Sebsi, who served as foreign minister and president of parliament in Ben Ali era, was 88 years old, during the December 22 election, he was elected as the new president. Egypt held the second presidential election in June 2014, and the former Defense Minister Sisi was elected with
overwhelming majority votes. The return of Egyptian military to politics has speeded up. The second trend is the political extremism. This model is mainly in Libya and Syria. After the collapse or weakening of authoritarian regimes in these countries, the countries will quickly fall into civil war or a mess. In this context, a variety of extremist religious forces came into power. The suddenly emerging “Islamic State” is trying to overturn the existing order, and establish a “Caliphate State”. New York Times columnist Friedman summed up the current trend in the Arab world as “ISIS mode” and “SISI mode”. The former is trying to rebuild the former theocracy, and the latter is to return to military rule.

Moreover, those countries, which temporarily escaped the “tide of regime change” in the Middle East before, are now facing varying degrees of low growth, high unemployment, fragile polity and other issues, especially the issue of succession has become increasingly prominent. Saudi Arabian King Abdullah passed away in January 2015 at 90 years. The successor Salman has been 79 years old; Sultan Qaboos of Oman is now 73 years old but does not have any heirs; President of Algeria Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was re-elected four times as the president, has been 77 years old; Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir has been 70 years old. These countries are facing succession crisis, thus the prospect of political situation is full of variables.

Overall, the Middle East countries have failed to deal with three problems over the years: First, the problem of social order and development; the second is the relations between minority and the majority; the third is the secular and religious powers. In order to find a way or national governance mode to effectively solve the problems, there is apparently a long and difficult way to go.
II. The Regional Game Shows a New Trend of “Geopolitical Scramble + Sectarian Conflict” and “New Cold War”

Before the upheaval in the Middle East, the region is crowded with big powers, mainly represented by the game between the moderate camp and radical camp (actually pro-American and anti-American camps). After the upheaval in the Middle East in 2011, the pattern of powers was re-shuffled. Moderate camp including Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, etc. achieved regime change and bogged down, and was not able to interfere in regional affairs in the short term. In contrast, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries “exchanged peace with money”, and successfully escaped the “regime change” wave. Saudi Arabia replaced Egypt and became the “leader” in the Arab world. Among the radical camp, due to the joint intervention of internal and external forces, Gaddafi regime in Libya was overthrown, and the country fell into a mess; full-blown civil war broke out in Syria, and Bashar al-Assad regime was unable to regain the ruling power in the country. In contrast, only the Iranian regime is stable and has strong comprehensive national strength. In addition, Iran dares to resort to force when resolving regional hot issues, and its relations with the United States and other Western countries are also easing. As a result, Iran’s regional influence increasingly improved. Game in the Middle East is becoming a contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Some scholars have pointed out “the best framework for understanding politics in the Middle East is the Cold War situation that Iran and Saudi Arabia are playing leading roles” (Gause, F., 2004: 1).

This “new Cold War” is mainly manifested in various areas: First, geopolitical competition. Saudi Arabia and Iran have taken the relatively weaker countries in the region as a pawn in the game and battlefields. In Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and other countries, they started proxy wars (Hashemm, A., 2014: September 24). Second, the oil war. Relied on its $750 billion foreign exchange
reserves, as well as the status of the largest oil producer, Saudi Arabia initiated a price war in June 2014, resulting in international oil prices’ decline—the prices were plunged by half. The main purpose that Saudi Arabia launched a price war is to maintain market share, and also to weaken Iran (Snyder, M., 2015: January 2). Iran had been under tough Western sanctions; its oil revenues dropped from $115 billion in 2011 down to $62 billion in 2013. It also experienced continuous negative economic growth in 2012 and 2013. The oil price now is declining endlessly, so that the Iranian economy is getting worsen. Third, in security field, on December 9, 2014, the Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia announced that they would set up a joint naval force. The purpose is to deal with “Islamic State” and the threat of Iran. Fourth, the media war. Iranian media frequently criticized Saudi Arabia. On September 6, 2014, Iran’s Cosmic News (کیهان) wrote a report accusing the Saudi Arabian royal family of getting the ruling legitimacy by the name of Islam. It said that the Saudi Arabian royal family is the enemy of Muslims, and it was time for its collapse. Khamenei’s representative in the Revolutionary Guard Ali Said accused Saudi Arabia of funding the “Islamic State”, and sowing conflicts in the Islamic world, aiming at destroying the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly accused Iran as well. On October 20, 2014, Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal publicly declared that, in the Middle East, “Iran is part of the problem rather than part of the solution to the problem” (Tehran Times, 2014: October 16). According to Wiki Leaks, Saudi Arabian officials suggested the United States military to attack Iran, and sent a special envoy to negotiate with Russia to purchase Russian oil in exchange for Russia’s suspension of support for Bashar regime and Iran.

It should be noted that Saudi Arabia and Iran, in both their domestic and foreign affairs, have heavy religious overtones: the Saudi Arabian royal family and the Wahhabi are long-term alliances; the Saudi Arabian king is also entitled himself the “guardian of the two holy places”, and the leader of the Islamic world. Iran is the largest Shia faction country. After the 1979 revolution, it implemented
the “jurists ruling” and “export the Islamic revolution”. Thus, games between the two states have the feature of “geopolitical plus sectarian conflict”.

Overall, the “new Cold War” between Iran and Saudi Arabia has led to a more volatile regional situation.

On the one hand, regional sectarian conflicts are aggregated among states. Sunni and Shiite populations compose most Middle Eastern countries, but they do not necessarily have prominent sectarian conflicts, at least not the principal contradictions. As the Middle East becomes increasingly out of control, the tribal and religious conflicts in Middle East countries have become more intense in general. In particular, Saudi Arabia and Iran compete in this region, further fueling the existing contradictions. In Iraq, most of Shiite ruling leaders have close relationship with Iran; Saudi Arabia is trying to support Iraq’s Sunni forces. After the rise of the “Islamic State”, Iran offered to send elite troops to help the Iraqi government. Hezbollah in Lebanon also claimed that it would strike “Islamic State” in Iraq with military forces of five times of the strikes in Syria. “Islamic State” in turn openly declared war on Hezbollah (Levitt, M., 2014: July 1). Since Syria fell in turmoil in 2011, it has become the “intersection” and “radiation source” of intensified conflicts between two major sects. Bashar al-Assad regime got support from Iran and other Shiite forces, while Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other Sunni countries backed the Syrian oppositionists. Even in face of the threat of Islamic State, Saudi Arabia and Turkey still regarded “the step down of Bashar al-Assad” as a priority target (Arab News, 2014: September 26). In Lebanon, around the issue of “support or oppose Bashar al-Assad”, sectarian conflicts in Lebanon were intensified. Hezbollah sent troops to help Assad regime, thus was regarded as an agent of Iran by other denominations. In the northern city of Tripoli in Libya, those in support of the Syrian government and factions opposed to it clashed frequently, causing heavy casualties and property losses. In Yemen, the Iran backed Houthi armed group in the north, which had the Shiite background. Iran supported its occupation of the capital of
Sanaa in September 2014; Saudi Arabia supported the Sunnis in south of the country. In Yemen, there formed the confrontation between Houthi armed group, Sunni tribal militants and Al-Qaeda. Overall, these types of regional conflicts, which are based on sectarian conflicts, are harder to resolve than pure competition of national interests.

On the other hand, Israel has become the biggest beneficiary of the “dogs’ fight”. Israel has long surrounded by the Arab world. It has the best hope of the Islamic world falling into strife, so that the states will be too busy or unable to contain Israel. Years since the upheaval in the Middle East, the fighting between moderates and the radical camp has been intensified in Middle East, so that the geopolitical map of relevant nations has a trend of fragmentation, which is now increasingly evident, whereby Israeli geopolitical environment has improved. In this new context, due to the reduced constraints, Israel is becoming more and more reckless in the Middle East. On July 8, 2014, under the excuse of deaths of several Israeli teenagers, Israel launched the “action of protecting the blade” in Gaza for a period of 50 days, This resulted in 2,145 deaths of Palestinians, 60,000 houses were destroyed and more than 100,000 people were homeless. Gaza suffered economic losses of over $4.4 billion. The reconstruction costs would be four times the GDP of Gaza (Becker, R., 2014: August 6). Israel also closed the Al-Aqsa Mosque, destroyed a suspect residence, which was considered to be involved in the terrorist attack, approved new Jewish settlements several times, and shot Palestinian government minister to death. Since 2011, Israel has launched air strikes on Syria’s military and civilian facilities several times, completely ignoring the Syrian national sovereignty. The EU Senior Representative for Foreign Affairs Mogg Rini said, Israeli excessive use of force was “worrying”.

Games between Iran and Saudi Arabia are not static, but dynamically changing as the situation changes. Currently, as the threat of “Islamic State” increases, the need for limited cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has surged. Bilateral relations show the signs of improvement. On January 23, 2015, Iranian Foreign
Minister Zarif went to Riyadh to attend the funeral of Saudi Arabian King Abdullah. A day earlier, Iranian President Rohani called the new king of Saudi Arabia Salman, expecting to further improve bilateral relations. Overall, the two sides still have structural contradictions, and on regional issues, they still stand against each other. The conflict is clearly greater than cooperative potential; therefore, the game is still the main tone of bilateral relations.

III. The Sudden Emergence of the “Islamic State” Shakes the Foundation of the Middle East System

Since the upheaval in the Middle East, the Middle East is experiencing a political trend of extremism and conservatism: dramatic changes in 2011 led to collapse or weakening of Mubarak, Gaddafi, Assad and other secular nationalist regime in the Middle East; in successive democratic transition, “Muslim Brotherhood” “Al-Nour Party”, “Baathist” and other moderate Islamic movement enjoyed a moment of glory; As the Middle East mess became more serious, moderate Islamists lost power, and extremist religious forces advocate terrorist and use violence from behind. This is represented by the sudden emergence of the “Islamic State” in June 2014.

Comparing with other extremist terrorist organizations, “Islamic State” has four new features: First, it has larger political ambitions. As early as the establishment of “Islamic State of Iraq” (predecessor of the “Islamic State”) in 2006, the organization decided to build a cross-border Sunni state in Iraq and Syria. Currently, the “Islamic State” controlled nearly 200,000 square kilometers of land, and publicly declared statehood. Second, the more extreme policies. “Islamic State” advocates to strictly abiding by Islamic law; banning alcohol and music, even watching the World Cup is prohibited. Alcohol is prohibited in the occupied territories, as well as music and other activities, and they ordered circumcision of millions of school-age women, imposed stoning for adultery, and often dealt “infidels” and captives with kidnapping, beheading, killing, buried
alive, and other bloody ways. Even the Al-Qaeda could not tolerate extreme practices of “Islamic State”. The Al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri actually accused “Islamic State” as an “extreme terrorist organization”. Third, more adequate financial resources. through protection rackets, smuggling, kidnapping, bank robbery, accepting donations from the Gulf countries, etc., “Islamic State” gained the total assets of nearly $2 billion (Iranian Diplomacy, 2014: July 30), and became “the world’s richest terrorist organization”. It is estimated that the “Islamic State” has $50 million in oil revenues per month (Dreazen, Y., 2014: June 16). “According to another report, the total monthly income of “Islamic State” reached to $100 million (Iranian Diplomacy, 2014: July 30). Fourth, stronger military capability. In the early founding period of “Islamic State”, they were only able to place roadside bombs, but could not confront the US military or the Iraqi military. However, after the influence of Syria civil war, the total number of members of the organization has reached 20,000 to 31,000, who had the ability to skillfully use a variety of light and heavy weapons and coordinate with terrestrial groups on the ground. Combined with the influence of extremist religious ideology, it has a resolute will in battlefields, and is “the most formidable terrorist”. Although the organization will not really succeed, or completely change the order of the Middle East, it will not be easily consumed. In quite a long time, “Islamic State” will become an important part of the political movements in the Middle East (Katulis, B., & Lang, H., & Singh, V., 2014: June 17). “Islamic State” has shaken the foundation of the order of Middle East, which has become fragile in the unrest and will increasingly be caught in dysfunction.

Sovereign state system faces major challenges. Foundation of social order in the Middle East is very fragile. After World War I, Britain and France divided the Arab world into a number of “Mandate countries” on the basis of the secret “Sykes - Picot Agreement” reached in 1916. These sovereign states imposed by outside powers are inherently lack of social order. In this region, attempts and aspirations to subvert and restructure regional order never suspended.
After the 2011 upheaval in the Middle East, Syria, Libya and other countries have been caught in the chaos, together with the previous Iraqi political turmoil; the capability to safeguard the sovereignty of the national system has been significantly weakened in the Middle East. Sectarian and tribal forces are increasingly gaining ground. The sudden emergence of the “Islamic State” in June 2014 forms an unprecedented huge strike to the existing order in the Middle East. The organization claims that one of its objectives is to destroy the border and states declared by the “Sykes - Picot Agreement” (As-Safir, 2014: June 29). It also claims a plan to occupy the Iberian Peninsula and threatens to occupy the entire Middle East, East Africa, Central and Northern Europe, eastern, southern and western Black Sea, central and western Asia (including most of the western region of India and even China) in five years, and to establish a “caliphate empire”. The political ambitions were supported by many extremist organizations in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Maldives, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and other countries (Ahmad, T., 2014: September 10). While this arrogant idea is difficult to achieve, the “Islamic State” breaks the Syrian-Iraqi border and attempts to establish their own statehood, and advocates to redraw the Middle East map. It has shaken the foundation of Middle Eastern sovereign state system that has been maintained for nearly a century.

First, it is very likely that Iraq will be divided from one country into three. Iraq is an “artificial state” created by the British colonialists. It is composed of three provinces of the Ottoman Empire (Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul) and the Arab Shiite, Sunni Arab and Kurdish Sunni compose its population. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, conflicts among the three sectarians have increasingly become dominant. Maliki were in power for eight years since he took office in 2006. His implementation of sectarian policies further increased sectarian divergences. The current rise of the “Islamic State” is irreconcilable with the Shiites and Kurds. In order to completely disrupt Iraq, it was deliberately inciting sectarian hatred in Iraq and destroying mosques and shrines of “infidels” in the occupied
territories, which has worsened sectarian conflict in Iraq. Currently, Shiites, Christians and other religious minorities have fled from the “Islamic State” occupied areas. Shia has also expelled Sunni residents of other areas. In Iraq, there have been similar signs of ethnic cleansing (Hauslohner, A., 2014: September 30). Currently, Kurdistan flag is used in the northern Kurdish region; in the southern city of Basra, they also designed their own banner. Due to the short-term inability of Iraqi government to destroy the “Islamic State”, it will be hopeless to restore unity in Iraq, and it is likely to form the three pillars of disunity along natural and historical boundaries (Gelb, L., 2014: October 17).

Second, Syria is also facing similar prospect of separation. Syria has a various ethnic and religious groups. The structure is more complex than Iraq: From the perspective of ethnic composition, it has populations of Arabians, Kurds, Armenians, Turkmen and Kyrgyz people; from the religious perspective, 87% of the population are Muslims (60% are Sunnis, 12% are Alawites, Kurdish Sunnis account for 10%, Druze for 5%), and 13% are Christian. Since Syria fell into a full civil war, Bashar government has increasingly lost control of the country, and only occupied Damascus and Latakia and other Shiite neighborhoods. In the northeastern, Kurdish have been in autonomy already, while various Sunni rebels (including “Islamic State”) have occupied elsewhere. Currently, “Islamic State” focuses on Syria as the expansion target, not only gets through the border of Iran and Syria, but also continues to expand the territory. In addition, the West and parts of the country view it as the responsibility to overthrow the Assad regime. As a result, the Bashar government is unable to restore the rule of the past, and the Syrian territory geopolitical fragmentation is a foregone conclusion.

In addition, Separatists in other countries of the Middle East are also around the corner. For example, the re-emergence of voice of separation between the north and south Yemen appeared in southern Yemen (Baroud, R., 2013: October 16); Resurgence of old grudges among Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan—the three parts of Libya
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tends to enhance the separation. Among these, the most noteworthy is the increasingly prominent issue of the Kurdish. Kurds are one of the four largest ethnic populations in the Middle East (the other three are Arabs, Persians, and Turks), but so far have not established an independent country. Therefore, the Kurds have been seeking independence and such movement stretches without a break. The current upheaval in the Middle East and the “Islamic State” rise have provided a rare opportunity for the Kurdish independence movement (Winter, C., 2014: June 16). Iraqi Kurdish regional government has long been in a high degree of autonomy, and sent various levels of “diplomatic representatives” to 38 countries. The “Kurdistan” map sold locally covers the territory of a number of countries including Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria. In June 2014, after the rise of the “Islamic State”, Iraqi Kurdish regional government took the opportunity and occupied the oil city of Kirkuk, expanding their site by a 40% increase at a single night. Meanwhile, Iran and some Western nations, in order to curb the expansion momentum of the “Islamic State”, provided weapons to the local armed Kurdish. Turkish Kurds have begun training “freedom fighters”. These initiatives objectively enhance the strength of the Iraqi Kurdish militants. In Syria, as the “Islamic State” rises, especially in the siege of Kobane, the Syrian Kurds and the Iraqi Kurds have to collaborate to fight back, thus their armed forces are becoming stronger. The Turkish government has quietly changed its attitude. Celik, spokesman of the Justice and Development Party said: “for Turkey, an independent Kurdish nation used to be a cause of the war, but now no one has the right to say this is the case.”

Regional terrorist forces spread from the dots into a film; anti-terrorism in the Middle East has become a new problem. In Middle East, terrorist activities have been rampant. After the upheaval in the Middle East, the Middle East countries failed in transition, which increased regional security vacuum and provided a rich soil for terrorist activities to breed and spread. Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations took the opportunity to expand the scope of their activities and focused on “limbo zone” (such as in eastern Libya,
northern Mali, Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula and in some areas of Syria) to establish stronghold, so that the terrorism has once again grown. The current rise of the “Islamic State” used Syria and Iraq as a base, linking the entire West Asia and North Africa extremists together into an area, such as: from east to west, the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Pakistani Taliban, and the “al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula branch in Yemen; Levant region’s “Islamic State”, North Africa’s “Maghreb al-Qaeda”, the Libyan “Libyan Islamic Fighting Group”, “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad” in Nigeria and Somalia “Islamic Youth Party” and other terrorist extremist organizations. According to the BBC survey, in November 2014, more than 5,000 people worldwide were killed by “jihadists”, where the “Islamic State” had caused more than 2,000 death tolls. In Iraq, a total of 15,538 people were killed in 2014, more than doubled compared to the 6,522 in 2013. According to the United Nations Mission in Iraq, in 2014 there were 12,282 people died in violence in Iraq, of which about 8,500 people died after the “Islamic State” occupied Mosul in June.

The “Islamic State” has big ambitions, strength, and has replaced the Al-Qaeda and become the “leader” and “center” of extremist terrorist organizations in the Middle East. Currently, in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other countries, there have been the “Islamic State” supporters. Egypt’s “Caliph Soldiers on the Land of Egypt” and “Jerusalem Supporters” declaring allegiance to the “Islamic State”. The Algerian Jund al-Khilifa, JMA of the Chechnya rebels, Nigeria’s “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad”, the Pakistani Taliban and other organizations have also claimed loyalty to the “Islamic State”. The “Jemaah Islamiyah” in Indonesia, the Philippines’ Abu Sayyaf armed groups, “Islamic Movement” in Uzbekistan and other terrorist organizations have also expressed support for it. According to CNN reports, since June 2014, the “Islamic State” has received support from dozens of organizations from Algeria to Pakistan. Affected by this, France, Canada, Australia and other Western countries have
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frequently suffered from a “lone wolf” type of terrorist attack.

After the rise of “Islamic State” and other extremist groups, terrorism versus counter-terrorism has become a new conflict in the Middle East. The “Islamic State” at this stage aims at consolidating its ruling in Iraq and Syria, but its goal for next phase is to conquer the neighboring Islamic countries, from Saudi Arabia to Iran, and finally to Rome (Camon, Y., & Yehoshua, Y., & Leone, A., 2014: September 14). This means that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are facing a direct threat. In this context, the GCC countries are forced to adjust policy, regarding counter-terrorism as a priority, and to take measures, such as stopping financial aid, enacting anti-terrorism law, etc. 5 monarchies including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan directly participated in the US air strikes against “Islamic State”. Turkey also changed its low-key policy, and stressed the need to level up strikes against “Islamic State”.

In the foreseeable future, it is still difficult to completely exterminate the “Islamic State”, which means that in the future, for a long period of time, the organization will continue to play a “spoiler” role, and the unrest will continue in the Middle East.

IV. The Established Strategic Plan of US Has been Disrupted, and US Was Trapped in the Middle East Strategic Dilemma

The United States is the greatest outside force that exerts political influence in the Middle East. Changes in US foreign policy have a direct impact on the situation in the Middle East. Since Obama took office in 2009, US foreign policy presents two directional adjustments that are related to each other. On the one hand, the US stepped up strategic contraction in the Middle East. The US has implemented counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East for a decade. It consequently fell into the quagmire of war, and suffered a serious setback of hard and soft power, which forced the Obama administration to reconsider their Middle East policy and to reduce
investment in the Middle East. Five years ago, the total armed forces of the United States in the Gulf region were 2.3 million people, but now, there is less than 5,000 people remaining (Rovner, J., & Talmadge, G., 2014: November 1). On the other hand, it shifted the strategic focus eastward and turned to contain China. Over the past decade, China and other emerging powers have taken the opportunity to accelerate their rises. The United States increasingly sees China as the biggest competitor. Based on this consideration, the United States is turning to China, and 60% of its military forces will be deployed in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, the US strategic contraction in the Middle East is carried out under the background that the Middle East has not been mature enough. Declines in US investment in the Middle East have led to imbalances in the Middle East power games. Regional hot issues are becoming intensified. The rise of “Islamic State” in June 2014 is an example. It often beheads Western reporters to show their strong hostility to the West. On September 22, 2014, the “Islamic State” called on its members and supporters to kill Americans and Europeans and Union citizens of “Islamic State” who support the US strikes on the “Islamic State” in any way or means. On September 26, FBI Director Komi said, “Islamic State” definitely will try to attack the United States. Polls show that 76% of Americans support air strikes against “Islamic State”, 45% of people support sending ground troops, and in case that the US embassy was attacked, those who support sending ground troops would reach 72% (Downing, B., 2014: November 19).

Under enormous internal and external pressure, the Obama administration has to change policies to increase investment in counter-terrorism in the Middle East. Since August 2014, the United States has launched several air strikes targeting “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria. In Obama’s speech at the UN General Assembly on September 24, he frankly admitted that the US had underestimated the strength and threat of the “Islamic State”, and clearly defined the “Islamic State” as “the most dangerous enemy” (Associated Press, 2014: September 24). Secretary of State Department Christopher,
Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel and other senior officials have said, the US goal was to make the “Islamic State” lose their ability to launch terrorist attacks, and thus no longer pose a threat to the United States and the Middle East. The US military personnel in Iraq have reached 3,100. The United States also set up anti-terrorism coalition involving more than 60 countries. Since August 8, 2014, the United States and its Western allies have launched 2000 air strikes on the “Islamic State”, but did not stop the “Islamic State” from expansion. In February 2014, “Islamic State” had only about 2 million armed terrorists, now it has more than 3 million (Sciutto, J., & Carter, C., 2014: September 12).

Currently, the US is facing a dilemma in Middle East policy as well as a number of structural contradictions.

First, it relates to shortage in the hard power and involvement in too much external affairs. Obama is committed to the “strategic eastward”, indicating that China has been regarded as the major competitor; in 2014, the Ukraine crisis intensified US-Russia conflicts, and the United States listed Russia as the main rival to be suppressed; after a meteoric rise “Islamic State” in the Middle East, the United States was forced to increase the anti-terrorism efforts in the Middle East. In Obama’s speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2014, the Ebola, Russia and the “Islamic State” were entitled “the world’s three major threats”. America is facing more and more opponents, but the strength and means of the United States to meet the challenges have been insufficient. Currently, the US Army has reduced the number of personnel from 570,000 to 505,000, which will even be reduced to 490,000 by the end of 2015. If Congress does not cancel the planned automatic budget reduction in 2016, it is possible that the US Army will be shrunk to 420,000 (Branning, K., 2014: November 14). Under the background that goals and capabilities are in a serious asymmetry, the US cannot attack on all fronts or address multiple strategic adversaries. This makes it difficult for the United States to make a strategic choice.
Second, the US does not only want to increase anti-terrorism investment in the Middle East, but also tries to control the situation in the Middle East. Over the years, the Obama administration has been seeking to get away from the Middle East. “Returning to Middle East for antiterrorism” runs counter to the previous foreign policy direction of Obama administration, which determines that the Obama administration will always be reluctant to fight against the “Islamic State”. In June 2014, within two months of rise of the “Islamic State” extremists, faced with the Maliki government’s requests, the Obama administration had not yet offered a hand. Even when air strikes on “Islamic State” began on August 8, it still repeatedly stressed military action to be “limited”, and repeatedly refused to send ground troops (Johnson, J., 2014: September 17). In order to beat the “Islamic State”, United States needs a comprehensive strategy including diplomatic, intelligent, economic, political and ideological considerations, which will be time-consuming and require a large amount of years to bear fruit (Alterman, J., 2014: September 17). Scholars at the American Institute for War believe that the use of the term “destroy” on “Islamic State” means that the US is seeking a comprehensive victory, but the current US military action is far less than enough (Harris, S., 2014: September 9). It is hard to beat the “Islamic State” with the US half-hearted counter-terrorism strategy in place.

Third, it involves in the contradiction in balance of priority between mopping up the “Islamic State” and containing the radical. US counter-terrorism in the Middle East mainly relies on allies in the region and western allies, but these allies have their own considerations: some of them participate but do not make contribution. Iraqi security forces have suffered from sectarian conflict, corruption, equipment and supplies shortage and other aspects of problems, and thus are weak in military capability. Jordan and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are small countries with limited power. They have no ability to confront the “Islamic State”; piles of domestic problems have occupied Egypt, so it refused to send troops to get involved in the war; Turkey promised to send ground troops, but
absolutely refused to take further hinterland actions in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, “moderate oppositionists”, Kurdish “freedom fighters” and Shiite militias and other armed local forces have their own plans—they all want to take advantage of US air strikes to achieve their political goals (Wehrey, F., 2014: September 11). Data show that in December 2014 the United States conducted 62 air strikes, while the US allies only had two air raids in Syria. It is difficult to form cooperated anti-terrorism forces in the Middle East. Therefore, it is unable to constitute a real threat to “Islamic State” (Hassan, 2014: September 11). Syria and Iran have the strongest willingness against the “Islamic States” and their military power is relatively strong, but they are excluded by the United States from the anti-terrorism coalition. The United States in September 2014 passed a new bill, granting $500 million funded to train and equip Syrian armed “moderate oppositionists”. This selfish strategy is difficult to effectively suppress the “Islamic State” (Cockburn, P., 2014: August 22).

Fourth, how to break the Predicament that “more investment in anti-terrorism, the greater the mess left behind”. For many years, United States has consumed its national power in the Middle East to fight against terrorism, but the effect is just on the opposite: extreme terrorist forces grow. This fully shows that in terms of the fight against terrorism, “high input does not equal to high efficiency” and may even have an opposite effect. Therefore, US policymakers are very worried that if the United States invested too much against “Islamic State”, that is, with “excessive force”, it will fall into the Middle East quagmire again. American scholars believe that, when the Al-Qaeda launched the 9/11 attack, the purpose was to stimulate the US overreaction, so it would be trapped deeply in the Islamic world. However, relying on the current “light footprint” strategy against terrorism including drones against terrorism, the use of special forces to carry out precision strikes, etc., is difficult to have a fatal blow on the “Islamic State”, which is an “upgrade” of extremist organizations. Currently, the only content of the US counter-terrorism strategy is a
military strike. Even if it successfully weakened the “Islamic State”, it would enhance the Al-Qaeda, the Al-Nusra-Front, “Khorasan” and other extremist organizations (Harrison, R., 2014: October 3). In the end, the United States might have no idea on what kind of counter-terrorism strategy will be effective and how to keep the right balance.

One big challenge the Obama administration will face in the future is the case that the “Islamic State” continues to wreak havoc. Will the United States return to the Middle East and conduct counter-terrorism, and even shift its strategy to focus again back to the Middle East? At least from the current indications, this is unlikely. First, it runs counter to the strategic direction of the United States. According to the Gallup poll on February 20, 2014, China for the first time replaced Iran to become the number one enemy in the eyes of the Americans. It is based on this consideration that the United States shifted the strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific area. “Returning to Middle East for antiterrorism” is clearly contrary to the direction of the Obama administration’s diplomatic plans. Second, America is not capable to do so. Because of damage of hard and soft power, the US has fallen from the top superpower to a “half-hearted superpower”. It is difficult for the United States to contain China in the East Asia, contain Russia in Ukraine, and also fight against “Islamic State” in the Middle East at the same time. Third, the US actually does not want the “Islamic State” to be completely exterminated. The expansion of “Islamic State” is a serious threat to US interests, but it is difficult to truly make a big deal, so its modest presence will have more advantages than disadvantages to the United States. This is because the organization would upset the Middle East countries, who will have to become more dependent on the United States, and also form a situation of mutual checks and balances in the Middle East, thereby creating a new historic opportunity for the United States to implement an “offshore balancing” policy. In this regard, the United States does not want to eliminate the terrorist organization.
V. Conclusion

The challenges the Middle East is facing will be comprehensive. From a perspective of political structure, national and regional governance model are still in the transition period that “old order has been broken, but the new order has not been established”. The current Middle East chaos is similar to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The current turmoil in the Middle East is just a prelude to the systemic transformation. Some analysts said that the current Middle East was in a period of “new Thirty-years War”, and the current situation “most likely is just a long, costly, the initial stage of life and death struggle; the event is likely to develop in the direction toward the worse” (Haass, R., 2014: July 21). In terms of an economic structure, almost (except for a few countries, such as Israel) all Middle Eastern countries are in a position downstream of the global industrial chain; therefore, it is easy for them to get hurt in the global economic crisis. The 2011 upheaval in the Middle East has proven this point. Even those oil-producing countries that were free from the chaos in the Middle East, in face of the continuing impact of the shale gas revolution, had to rely on the “price war” to maintain market share. The type of approach that the majority of these oil-producing countries rely on oil export revenues, hurts others with the price of hurting itself, resulting in the sharp drop in oil-producing revenue. It becomes difficult to maintain a model of “high oil prices, high welfare” and the symptoms of “oil curse” and “Dutch disease” appear. To a great extent, this is also a precursor of decline of OPEC’s global influence. Good days of the Middle East to merely live on oil resources and exports in the past have gradually gone. It is imperative to explore the sustainable development model. In short, neither of the two problems--peace and development in the Middle East, has been solved. Faced with the challenges, the relevant countries would have a long way to go in the future. Unrest in the Middle East will become the “new normal”.
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