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Subject: Worst Case Scenarios for the Narrower Middle East

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Please find attached the partially declassified version of document SIT-6577/07 CONFIDENTIAL UE/EU CONFIDENTIAL "Worst Case Scenarios for the Narrower Middle East".

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**COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

**Brussels, 12 July 2007**

**Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity**

**SIT-6577/07**

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From : Secretariat (SIAC)  
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Subject : Worst Case Scenarios for the Narrower Middle East

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Please find attached a note concerning worst-case scenarios for the Narrower Middle East.

It is an all-source assessment drawing on the full range of information available, including intelligence deriving from military and non-military sources. It is a product of the Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity (SIAC) developed in collaboration with the Commission.

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## Key judgements

- Western influence would probably be damaged in the case of major crisis affecting the region. For Europe, the disruption of energy supplies, a rise in anti-European terrorism and increased numbers of refugees and migrants trying to enter the European Union would be likely consequences.
- Western-style democracy is not an attractive model for the peoples of the Narrower Middle East. A certain *neopopulism*, rooted in political Islamism and strongly anti-Western, is the most credible alternative to the current regimes.
- The interests of the current leadership are better served by the *status quo*. The changes may benefit non-State players. As a result, social disintegration, or even chaos, are real possibilities in several countries of the region.
- Local crises in the Narrower Middle East can easily spread from one country to another and rapidly take on a regional nature.
- Chinese or Indian regional prestige would probably not be affected, or only slightly. Their ability to take advantage of their relatively improved situation would depend on the situation emerging as a result of the crisis. Widespread chaos would jeopardise energy supplies, vital for those countries.

## Introduction

1. We can expect major changes in the Middle East, a region that finds it particularly difficult to adapt to modernity. Those changes might allow Middle Eastern countries to overcome their current backwardness (the “best-case” scenario), but could also lead them towards further isolation from the world’s main currents and increased confrontation with the West.
2. The objective of this paper is to explore possible worst-case scenarios and the paths leading to them. We will only consider the “Narrower Middle East”, a region affected by two long-running conflicts (the Arab-Israeli and the Gulf/Iraq conflicts) stretching from Egypt to Iran (not including Israel and Turkey). Some neighbouring regions share many common features with the Narrower Middle East, but we think they can be better studied in a different context: the Maghreb, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

## The threats

3. In this report we will adopt a Eurocentric perspective. A “worst case” is, therefore, an event or series of events negatively affecting vital interests of the European Union and its Member States. Quite often, it is also a “worst case” for the countries of the region, but not always. From this point of view, the most worrying possible outcomes of different crises in the region are:
  - Disruption of energy supplies.
  - The region becoming a safe haven for international terrorists targeting Europe.
  - Large numbers of refugees or migrants trying to move to Europe.
4. Additionally, the weakening of pro-Western regimes and their eventual replacement by others radically opposed to the West would hamper our ability to influence the evolution of the situation. An extreme case would be if the fallen regimes were succeeded by chaos, where no players, either external or internal, had the ability to exert minimum control.

## The players

5. Existing States are the main players in the political game in the Narrower Middle East. Taking into account their size, the control they exert inside their borders and the support they enjoy from the relevant international powers, only five States can be regarded as important players in the region: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and Iran.
6. Some non-State entities, formed because of ethnic, sectarian or ideological affinities, play important roles in Middle East politics. In some cases, they can effectively challenge established regimes and, under certain circumstances, they could even replace them. Among the plethora of non-State players, the most important are:
  - *The Kurds*: particularly active in Iraq and Turkey, but also important in Syria and Iran.
  - *The Shias*: they are the ruling majority in Iran and Iraq, a disempowered majority in Bahrain and a significant factor in Yemen and throughout the Gulf region.
  - *The Muslim Brotherhood* (in general, non-violent manifestations of political Islamism): very important in Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories or among Iraqi Sunnis. It is also very influential in the ranks of the Syrian opposition.
  - *Jihadist* groups, influenced by *Al-Qaida*: they are particularly active in conflict regions, such as Iraq. They could gain importance in Lebanon and in the Palestinian Territories.

7. International players also have an important role in Middle East politics. The West (from a Middle East perspective, comprising the United States and the European Union, certain very close allies and, for most purposes, Israel) is the main economic partner, the most important military power and the reference for modernity and development. At the same time, it is also perceived by the peoples of the region as fundamentally hostile to Arabs and Muslims<sup>1</sup>.

The new industrial powers (mainly China and India) need free access to energy resources and their share in the foreign trade of the region is growing fast. Middle East countries welcome them as solid economic partners, which, unlike the US and the European Union, do not pursue a policy of conditionality.

### The environment

8. The Arabic-speaking world has become a single information space. Thanks to *Al Jazeera*, other satellite stations and internet, individual States would find it almost impossible to isolate their territories from the flow of news and comments coming from outside their borders and not subject to their control. As a result, events in one particular part of the Narrower Middle East can rapidly influence the situation in other countries. The fall of one of the current traditional regimes could precipitate a chain reaction making others more vulnerable.
9. The existence of multiple trans-border communities facilitates the transmission of goods, ideas and crises across state borders. Some of the more significant are:
- *Refugees*: in addition to the large number of Palestinian refugees settled in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon since 1948, the Iraqi conflict has produced a new wave of refugees. According to UNHCR sources, 2 million Iraqis are believed to have fled to nearby nations.<sup>2</sup> Iraqi refugees now make up a considerable proportion of the population in Syria and Jordan.
  - *The Kurds* live in a contiguous territory stretching across the borders between Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Other smaller national groups (Druzes, Armenians...) have an important presence in several countries of the region.
  - *Tribes* are frequently divided by artificial borders. Their members may be citizens of different States, but maintain significant bonds of cohesion and cooperate in cross-border economic activities, both legal and illegal.
10. National consciousness is weak throughout most of the region. Only Iran has developed a real feeling of state allegiance shared by the majority of its citizens. In the Arab world, Panarabism is still a strong competitor of the different “state ideologies”. At least at a symbolic level, the “Arab dimension” is an important part of many Arabs’ identity.
11. Most Middle East regimes are politically obsolete. Both the “traditional regimes” (mostly, monarchies) and the remaining representatives of “Arab socialism” have long outlived their usefulness. As part of a new triumphant paradigm, a certain *neopopulism*, ideologically rooted in a radical reading of Islam and overtly anti-Western, is on the rise throughout the whole

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1 Recent polls (*Global Attitudes Project*, June 2007; *Zogby International*, February 2007) suggest that Arab public opinions have a very negative image of the US and Israel. The European Union is not singled out in such surveys, although its position is usually depicted as supportive of America.

2 Briefing by a UNHCR spokesperson, 1 May 2007. <<http://www.unhcr.org>>.

region. The ethnic-based or sectarian regimes are a variation of *neopopulism*, which could be particularly successful in very fragmented societies. Western-style democracy is not yet an attractive model for Middle Easterners. Attempts to introduce democratic reforms (more competitive elections, for instance) have, in fact, served to reinforce the positions of the populist Islamists (Algeria, 1991; Egypt, 2005; the Palestinian Territories, 2006).

### Conflict extension

12. Conflicts in the region show a tendency to spread across borders and affect several, if not most, regional powers. All countries in the Narrower Middle East are, either directly or indirectly, part of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Likewise, civil strife in Iraq has a clear regional dimension. Future conflicts may originate in different States, but will probably have an effect well beyond their borders. The evolution of the situation in the region will probably be “path-dependent”: the point where the crisis has started may condition the crisis’ shape, the countries and forces affected and the positions that different players will adopt.
13. Existing divisions in the Middle East will determine the layout of future conflicts and the composition of the warring factions. In the Arab world, most of the fault lines are within States, rather than between different States. If the prevailing tendency is towards fragmentation, this fragmentation will probably take place at the level of each country in crisis, and may lead to chaos. The main fault lines are:
  - *Between Sunnis and Shias*. This is very important in Iraq and Lebanon, the Arab Peninsula and the Gulf countries; but it is almost irrelevant in countries with a very low number of Shias (or no Shias at all), such as Egypt. In the summer of 2005, the Egyptian *Muslim Brotherhood* (Sunni) supported *Hizbollah* (a Shia movement) in the war with Israel.
  - *Between Arabs and non-Arabs* (Iranians, Kurds...)
  - *Between rich and poor*. The frustration of the poor is one of the main reasons for the great popularity of radical Islamists.
  - *Between the pro-Israel/US/West camp and the anti-Israel/US/West camp*. The three categories (pro or anti-Israel, US or the West) are very similar, but not identical. No Middle Eastern regime would accept that it was considered pro-Israeli, even if its positions on the MEPP were regularly aligned with those of the US.
14. For practical purposes, “symbolic capital” (roughly equivalent to “prestige”) can be considered in the Middle East as a good aggregate indicator of the different factors of power. It has been defined as “political actors’ ability to carve out a cognitive political and social space for themselves that is recognised and respected by a critical mass. It enables political actors to authoritatively impose their views and readings of events and processes that are otherwise contentious to the core”<sup>3</sup>. Sometimes, symbolic capital allow different players to project influence beyond the fault lines. Regional events may help political players generate symbolic capital or contribute to lose it.

In the Narrower Middle East, the players win symbolic capital when:

- They support the Palestinians (the Palestinian issue is still central for Arabs and Muslims).
- They defeat, resist or refuse to cooperate (on a sliding scale) with Israel, the US, the West

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<sup>3</sup> LEENDERS, Reinoud. “Regional conflict formations’: Is the Middle East next?”. *Third World Quarterly* 28, 5 (July 2007): 959-982.

(again, on a sliding scale).

- They have economic success and provide material wealth to the majority of the population.

The converse for the above applies for losing symbolic capital. Additionally, actors also lose symbolic capital when:

- They are corrupt.
- They provoke disunity between Arabs and Muslims.
- They engage in or sponsor terrorism, particularly against other Arabs or Muslims. The Middle East understanding of terrorism is different from the Western. Usually, it does not cover what they consider “acts of resistance” (*Hamas* and *Hizbollah* actions, for instance).

### Contingencies leading to worst-case scenarios

15. Different contingencies could eventually trigger an important regional crisis in the Middle East. In this section, we will discuss seven of them in some detail. All are relatively likely and could lead to worst-case scenarios [see annex for details]. Only the first step in an eventual complex crisis is discussed here.
16. *Failure of the Middle East Peace Process*. The *road map* is formally or informally abandoned. The two-states solution appears unattainable, and no realistic one-state alternative replaces it. The Palestinian Authority disappears or is rendered powerless, but Israel refuses to accept full responsibility for the situation in the Occupied Territories. Those players more sceptical about the Peace Process (Iran, Syria, the Sunni radicals...) gain symbolic capital, while the West and its main regional allies lose it. Anti-Western terrorism and an increased number of refugees could be the consequences.
17. *Implosion of Iraq*. In the aftermath of a US withdrawal, Baghdad’s central government could lose control over significant parts of Iraq. No new central authority is likely to emerge. The Kurdish north could become independent “by default”, while in the central and southern part chaos would be a plausible alternative. The main winners, in terms of symbolic capital, would be those who opposed the Western military presence more fiercely, but also the Kurds, because of the chance of securing independence. The consequences could be very serious. A new wave of state-formation could destabilise neighbouring countries (Turkey, Syria). Large numbers of refugees could be forced to leave their homes. Energy supplies would probably be endangered.
18. *Western attack on Iran*. It would probably trigger an Iranian response against Western allies in the Gulf, as well as Shia upheaval in different parts of the region. Iran and the Shias, but also *Al Qaida* (because of its anti-Western militancy) would gain symbolic capital, while the regional prestige of the West would be severely damaged. The disruption of energy supplies would be a likely effect, and it could last more or less time depending on the outcome of the conflict. A rise in state-sponsored and *jihadi* terrorism could be expected in Europe and the US. Depending on the duration and intensity of the conflict, significant numbers of refugees could seek shelter in Western countries.
19. *Regime breakdown in Syria*. An Islamist regime in Damascus, or widespread chaos, would be the most likely replacement for Assad’s regime. All State players in the region, with the possible exception of Iran, would lose symbolic capital, while the big winners would be the Kurds, *Al Qaida* and, to a lesser extent, the *Muslim Brotherhood*. The immediate consequence would be a considerable increase in the number of refugees. Longer-term effects would

depend on the seriousness of the crises triggered by this contingency in other parts of the region.

20. *Regime breakdown in Egypt.* The *Muslim Brotherhood* is the most likely successor to the current regime. In general, all the regional enemies of the West would gain symbolic capital, while Western allies would lose it. The immediate consequence would be an important reduction of US and EU capacity to influence events in the Middle East. The positions of the Islamists throughout the region and in the Maghreb would be reinforced.
21. *Regime breakdown in Jordan.* The end of the Hachemite monarchy could endanger the very existence of a largely artificial country. The *Muslim Brotherhood*, *Al-Qaida* sympathisers, Palestinian groups and Iraqi refugees would try hard to prevail over their rivals, or at least to control some parcels of power. As in the case of Egypt, the regional enemies of the West would be the big winners in terms of symbolic capital. A rise in terrorism against Western interests and a significant reduction of the Western influence in the region would be probable consequences.
22. *Regime breakdown in Saudi Arabia.* The fall of the House of Saud could endanger the existence of Saudi Arabia as a state and the whole balance of power in the Arabian Peninsula. While the West and its regional allies would lose symbolic capital, the main winners would probably be the radical Islamists. The West would lose one of its key allies in the Middle East, and energy supplies could be jeopardised. Anti-Western terrorists could find a new safe haven.

## Conclusions

23. Populist Islamist tendencies, with a strong anti-Western component, are on the rise in the whole region. In several countries, there is a real risk of chaos.
24. Crisis in the region could easily spread from one country to another and rapidly take on regional nature.
25. Most State players would be very adversely affected by the contingencies we have considered. The only exception is Iran, whose symbolic capital would probably increase, at least in the short term. Iran's ability to make use of this increased capital would depend, obviously, on its survival as an important regional power. An important consequence is that the States of the region are vitally interested in perpetuation of the *status quo*.
26. Non-State players would, to various degrees, benefit from the contingencies studied in this report. Therefore, crisis in the region would probably produce a weakening of existing State structures and widespread chaos.
27. Western influence would probably be damaged in the case of a major crisis affecting the region. Chinese or Indian symbolic capital would probably not be affected, or only slightly. Their ability to take advantage of their relatively improved situation would depend on the situation emerging as a result of the crisis. Widespread chaos would jeopardise energy supplies, vital for those countries.



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