

Middle East Geopolitical Situation in Transition

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Abstract: *Four years have past since the beginning of the Middle East upheavals; regional patterns of the Middle East have entered a deep-water zone: politically transitioning countries have faced three dilemmas and become disoriented; the old patterns shaped by the beginning of the upheavals are restructuring again, “old” orders recur increasingly in the “new” Middle East; power structures within the region are increasingly fragmented, which draws the whole region into turbulence; the upheavals also promote the strategic contraction of the US in the Middle East.*

Key Words: *Political Transition; Geopolitical Situation; Middle East Upheaval*

Currently, with the ongoing political transitions in the Middle East, the transitioning countries have faced increasing dilemmas. In turn, difficulties in the transition also have huge impacts on policies, the structural power systems of regional countries and their relationships with outside powers. The pattern shaped in the beginning of the upheavals is restructuring again and “old” orders recur in the “new” Middle East. More and more factors are contributing to the turbulence in this region, drawing the region to a new era of turmoil. The US is speeding up its strategic contraction in the Middle East, which makes the game in this region even more complex.

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I. Three dilemmas in the transition of the Middle East

If we describe the year 2011 in the Middle East as “a period of regime changes”, the year of 2012 as “a period of democratic transition”, following this logic, 2013 in this region can be viewed as a period of “transition and dissimulation”. During the year 2013, democratic transition in related countries has not led to stability and development, but to three new dilemmas. The revival of the Arab world becomes increasingly disoriented.

The first one is the institutional dilemma: decentralization or centralization? The internal contradictions in Middle East countries are very complicated. Previously, the stability of the countries is sustained by the strongman politics and authoritarian regimes. However, such situation can no longer persist after the Middle East upheavals in which strongman politics collapsed in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya. To resolve the long-existing problems, these countries abandoned the authoritarian regimes one after another, started their democratic transition and introduced multiparty systems and popular votes. However, the weakening of the governmental authorities will easily lead to the dysfunction of the countries. As Samuel Huntington pointed out that the degree of the stability of the politics is proportional to the degree of political institutionalization and inversely proportional to the degree of public participation (Huntington, S., 1989: 51). Authoritarian regimes have long been implemented in Middle East countries and the degree of the political institutionalization has been quite low. Against such backdrop, democratic transitions may create many new problems out of thin air and lead to turbulence (Traub, J., 2013: November 1).

Such political turbulences can be found at two levels: on the level of political powers, political parties' competitions for power resulted in fragmented political power structures. The governmental authorities have been undermined, many governments in transitioning countries became somehow “disabled”. Other dysfunctional problems such as political stagnation and the deterioration of security situation have also occurred. In Egypt, more

than 60 parties contested parliamentary elections. In Tunisia, the number of parties surpassed 100. And in Libya, as many as 142 new political parties registered to compete in the country's first legislative elections (Muasher, M., 2013: November 13). The competitions for power among parties come and go. On July 25, 2013, the assassination of MP Mohamed Brahmi, the third political assassination in the country, followed those of Belaid Chokri on February 6, 2013, and of Lofti Nagued, coordinator of the secular Nidaa Tounes party, in October 2012. The parliament has been suspended and the political process has come to an impasse. In November of 2012, the national dialogue aimed at reconciliation had been suspended. Tunisia faces the vicious circle of violence (Mahjar-Barducci, A. & Sosnow, R., 2013: November 14). After the overthrow of Gadhafi in 2011, hundreds of militia groups have emerged in Libya, they fight with others with their own guns. The government's control over the country became increasingly weak. Repeated violent cases took place under such circumstances, like the kidnapping of former Prime Minister Ali Zaidan on October 10, 2013. The new government in Yemen's capability to control is even worse than that of its predecessor, which led to the running wild of the terrorism forces and reoccurrence of separatism. On the civil level, street protests have been an important way for the public to express their desire to participate in politics. One year has passed since the taking power of Morsi, during which more than 7,400 protests have been taken place in Egypt. Within just one month, Egypt has witnessed 1,432 protests in July 2013, 46 protests per day and 2 protests per hour on average. The army overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood, causing 1,600 killed and more than 8,000 injured. As many as 5,000 to 10,000 people have been sent to prison (Dunne, M., 2013: November 5). However, even at such high cost, turbulences remain lingering around in Egypt. Street protests do more harm than good to political transition in the Middle East. It will easily be made use to service people's selfish interests (Lynch, M., 2013: October 25). In short, no matter the governments' policies are strict or loose, dilemmas still exist. Countries in this region are just like ships in the ocean without captain, crew or marine equipment. They have neither harbor to dock nor direction to sail.

The second difficulty is the agenda dilemma: democracy first or people's livelihood first? At the beginning of the "rebellion", Arab people have dual demands on political democracy and economic improvement. However, in the practice of the transition, most countries view the "democratization" as the panacea to the dilemmas. But in fact, democratic elections are only panaceas to the legitimacy of election process instead of economic related issues. What's more important, under specific time and space, goals of democratic and economic development are mutually exclusive. If one wants to improve people's livelihood in the true sense and achieve equality in economy and social status, he should forcibly outlaw current class privilege and reform the irrational social relations of production. However, the implementing of these methods requires strongman politics and highly centralized political system. By contrast, if one wants to carry out constitutional democracy, he should maintain the rationality and legitimacy of current political instead of introducing fundamental changes in current economic and class structure. As Huntington pointed out that the price for the coming of the reforms is autocratic government's suppression on the expression of the will and the old national system, while the price for safeguarding freedom is maintain the outdated privileges, property, autocracy, class structure and the church's participation in national politics (Huntington, S., 1989: 146). Therefore, the policies of "democratic transition first" will undermine the economic development on the contrary.

The practices have demonstrated that political turbulences caused by democratic transition have made the economic situation of relative countries even worse. In the period between January 2011 and May 2013, Egypt has been counted 16 downgrades by major international credit agencies. Its foreign currency reserves, which stood at \$36 billion around the time of the revolution, have recently climbed back from a record low of \$13.4 billion in March to \$16.04 billion in May 2013. The deficit has risen in the first 10 months of the fiscal year of 2013 from around \$16.8 billion during 2012 to around \$26.4 billion (Sabry, B., 2013: June 13). There are analyses holding that the revolution made Egyptian economy fall back at least 15 to 20 years. After the fall of Gadhafi, the oil export in Libya once reverted to

prewar average exporting volume of 160 million barrels per day. However, the oil exports dropped to less than 10% of capacity as protestors blocked oil fields and refused to negotiate (Traus, J., 2013: November 1). Libya lost \$13 billion against such backdrop. In Syria, the economic development has plunged due to the continuously civil war. As of July 2013, as many as 2.3 million jobs have disappeared since the beginning of the war; nearly 3,000 schools had been partially or totally damaged; 49%, or one out of two children, had been forced to quit their school; over 40% of the country's hospitals have been out of service. As of November 2013, the war has produced nearly three million Syrian refugees, of which only 2.2 million have been granted refugee status, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Srouf, R., 2013: November 8). According to the statistical data of HSBC, the average declining of GDP of seven countries who suffered most in turbulence in West Asia and North Africa is 35%. In such a case, growing people are dissatisfied with the general direction that their country is taking (78% in Tunisia and 62% in Egypt), and feel that current economic conditions are bad (83% in Tunisia and 76% in Egypt) (Ghanem, H., 2013: July 25). Improvement of people's livelihood becomes the top priority of public concern (According to the Pew Research Center, 81% people in Egypt list "economic improvement" as the most important topic in future). However, democratic process is an irreversible process. These countries have no choice but to continue democratic development and leave the economic development aside currently. But as long as the democratic transition cannot bring benefits to the public, ordinary people will not approve the democratization; they may even launch a new round of revolution.

The third one is the ideology dilemma: secularism or Islamism? Most countries in the Middle East pursue secularism, making the separation of church the basic premise of their comprehensive modernization. Islam has long been limited to the certain scope of beliefs and religious forces have been restricted in a subordinate position. However, during the Middle East upheaval and the subsequent democratic transition, due to the lack of powerful secular opposition, political Islamic organizations survive under the cloths of religions. They become the most influential social and political

organizations in the Middle East by their clear ideology and high degree of organization (Brumberg, D., 2005: 97-116). Islamic forces took power one after another in countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Libya, although their respective fates vary.

However, after the coming to office, these political forces vigorously promote the policies of Islamization. For instance, after coming to power, Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood required alcohol prohibition, separation between men and women and wearing the hijab of Muslim women; after taking the office of Tunisian Baath Party, new president Maerzuji refused to list the "equality of the sexes" in the constitution, and the Salafists in this countries repeatedly attack secular politicians and places including cinemas, exhibitions and bars. Many claims of political Islamic forces (e.g. unification of the state and the church, carrying out Sharia law) are out of tune with secular values. Therefore, the coming to offices of the political Islamic forces and trend of Islamization worsen the long-existing contradictions between secular and religious forces in relative countries. The army in Egypt overthrew the Morsi government on July 3, 2013 and suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood, which can be viewed as an example of the coming out into the open of the conflicts between secular and religious forces. The history of the political transition in the Middle East repeatedly demonstrates that democratization will inevitably lead to the coming to power of Islamic forces and the development of Islamization while secularization relies mainly on authoritarian rules. Hence, the region faces an either-or choice between autocratic secularization and democratic Islamization. The choice of secularized democracy is non-existent.

Up to now, transitional countries in the Middle East have not found a proper development model yet, which left elites and ordinary people in Arab countries disappointed and confused. A survey shows that there are 12% people in Egypt support secular parties to come to power and 2% people support fundamentalism parties, which means that 86% other Egyptian are disappointed in all political parties and even fed up with the party politics (Zhang, M., 2013: November 5). The political transition in the Middle East has come to a dilemma and the turbulence caused by that may last for years.

II. “Old” Orders Reoccur Increasingly in “New” Middle East

The Middle East upheaval and subsequent political transition reorganized the political pattern of the region and shaped a “new” Middle East. There are several “indicators” that suggest the direction of the future development of the regional pattern: the regime-changing countries represented by Syria, the political transitioning countries represented by Egypt, as well as the relatively stable countries represented by Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Viewing from these “indicators”, “old” orders are reoccurring increasingly in “new” Middle East, which can be reflected in following aspects:

First, the teetering regime in Syria gradually curbs the wave of regime changes which have lasts for years. The Jasmine Revolution, broke out in Tunisia in 2011, has led to an unprecedented wave of regime changes in West Asia and North Africa. Former regimes had been overthrown one after another in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. It is expected that Syria will be the next domino after the Syria crisis that has taken place since March 2011. If Bashar Hafez al-Assad, current President of Syria, was overthrown, its spillovers might bring out a new round of regime changes. Even Iran would be affected then. However, the Assad regime did not downfall rapidly as Gaddafi regime. As of the end of the year 2013, Assad still has majority public support domestically and is politically recognized by powers including Russia and China. Regional powers, such as Iran, still provide military and economic assistance to it. Present day, the Assad regime has already gone through the toughest times and turned defense into offense on the battlefield.

The coming to impasse of the Syria crisis has created a dilemma for foreign intervention forces and promoted the differentiation of them. Internationally, after the crisis of the chemical weapon in Syria in August 2013, Obama administration, who claimed that “the chemical weapon is the redline of force using” previously, accepted Russia’s plan of handing over control of chemical weapons for peace after swashbuckling, reflecting that the US does not want to be

involved in Syria crisis seriously. US compromise has somehow eased regional countries' anti-Syria sentiment. Domestically in Syria, long-time stalemate increases the internal contradictions among Syrian oppositions. Against such backdrop, relative parties realized increasing clearly that the Syria crisis cannot be resolved simply by the use of forces. Negotiations become the first choice of countries once again. Under the mediation of countries including the US and Russia, the second round of Geneva II Conference on Syria has been held on January 22, 2014, which marked the first time that both Syrian government and opposition sit at the negotiating table. Viewing from the long term, due to the change of the positions of external powers, the destruction of chemical weapons is unable to continue without the cooperation of the Assad regime and cannot be accomplished until June 2014. The election will be held in September 2014 in Syria. Therefore, in a foreseeable future, current regime will continue its rule in this country. Syria crisis can be described as the eye of the storm of regime changes in the Middle East. From this perspective, the wave of regime changes in the Middle East is expected to be curbed by the continuation of the Assad regime and the regional configuration will return to normality then.

Second, repeated occurrence of the turbulence in Egypt led the regional pattern and the political transition moving even backward. Egypt can be seen as the bellwether of the Arab world. The driving effect of its political transition on the development of the regional pattern is obvious. Since 2013, due to the high costs of its transition, demands of the people in Egypt have transformed from changes to stability. Many of them once again welcome authoritarian regimes and strongman politics which they firmly rejected. A nationwide protest has broken out on June 30, 2013 in Egypt against the Morsi government. With the public support, the army forcibly overthrown then democratically elected government led by Morsi and began to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, secular democratic forces have also been the targets of the suppression of the army. Ayman Nour, head of the Tomorrow Party (Hizb al-Ghad) in Egypt, has been exiled in Lebanon; Mohamed M.El Baradei, former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),

has left his homeland and been to Vienna; leaders of the April 6 Youth have been prisoned or arrested. The Egyptian government shut down three major Islamic television stations along with the not-so-neutral Egyptian offices of Al Jazeera. Many journalists have been arrested and at least six have been killed (Shamoo, A., 2013: October 31). The editorial of *Washington Post* holds that the military is setting the stage for a crackdown on the party that won the country's first democratic elections, as well as the elevation of a new military hero in the fashion of former dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser (Editorial Board, 2013: July 26).

The trend of returning to authoritarian regimes and strongman politics becomes increasingly obvious, which also has driving effects on other countries. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's natural instincts of acting arbitrarily have been gradually exposed. The Gulf States have also put more efforts in restricting the public opinion. Many opponents have been sent to prisons (Lynch, M., 2013: October 25). Also, turbulence in Egypt has brought out the re-adjustments in regional diplomacy and configuration. In terms of Syria issue, Morsi once high-profile announced to break off diplomatic regional with Syria previously while he rapidly changed his attitude and opposed the West's use of forces after the coup, so as to accelerate the collapse of the anti-Syria alliance. In terms of Iranian issue, Morsi paid a visit to Iran in August 2012, which marked the first visit to Iran from Egyptian president in more than 30 years. Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also paid a return visit in January 2013. There are obvious signs that the relationship between the two would be improved and even back to normal. However, after the break out of the coup, Egypt suspended the tourist projects between two countries and showed cautious attitude to Iran's new government led by Hassan Rohan. In terms of its relationship with Turkey, the relationship between Egypt and Turkey were quite close while the situation became entirely different after the coup. The relationship between Egypt and Gulf States has also been affected. Under the rule of Morsi administration, Egypt has a quite close relationship with Qatar. However, Egypt improved its relationship with Saudi Arabia and UAE significantly after the coup, leaving Qatar in a quite awkward position. Hamas also had no choice but to adjust its diplomacy in such

a case. After the Middle East upheaval, Hamas views Syria and Iran as enemies but considers Morsi government as a new backing. However, the fall of Morsi government burst the bubble, forcing Hamas to communicate with Syria and Iran (Irani, M., 2013: July 26). In addition, a televised national security meeting chaired by Morsi was held in which he mentioned possibility of military strikes against or intelligence sabotage of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam to resolve the threat of a water crisis (El-Adawy, A., 2013: October 17).

Third, the diplomatic expansion of countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia has been blocked, which stands in the way of the development of regional interventionism. Most of the countries in Arab world have fallen into turbulence after the Middle East upheaval increasingly absorbed by domestic crisis while still some countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey have successfully maintained their stability. The regional influence of the latter will definitely increase. The shift of the regional power made these stable countries much more active in participating in regional affairs. Regional interventionism has once risen for a time: Countries including Saudi Arabia dispatched military forces to Bahrain to assist its suppression on the protests of Shiites, provoked the Arab Union to use forces on Syria and tried to overthrow Syrian regime, stepped up the containment on Iran, and established a "Holy Alliance" in the Middle East. Turkish policies to neighboring countries have also changed dramatically and become active in keening to stir up regime changes: it was the first country that called for Mubarak's stepping down from the office; it took a part in instigating the fall of Gadhafi; it high-profile supported the oppositions in Syria. These countries once enjoyed some days of glory at the beginning of the Middle East upheaval.

However, since 2013, three big events blocked the expansion of the regional interventionism. The first one is the still existing of the Assad regime. The countries including Turkey and Saudi Arabia felt especially depressed when the US refused to use force on Syria. They have neither capability to use force themselves nor willing to let it go. Problems including refugees, Kurdish issue and bordering security, which were complaining among the public, are also ahead of Turkey. There are comments saying that, "Catastrophic for Syria and

disastrous for Turkey – the consequences of Turkey’s intervention in Syria over the past two years can be summed up in this way” (Salt, J., 2013: November 12). The second event is the fall of the Morsi government in July 2013, which made Turkey and Qatar’s previous efforts in their diplomacy and economic communication to Egypt come to naught. “Turkey has become one of the fiercest critics of the Egyptian army’s removal of the country’s first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi. Its regional and international attempts to delegitimize the army-backed interim government will make it significantly more difficult for Turkey to cooperate with the new Egyptian government on regional matters ... It will only deepen Turkey’s regional isolation.”(Tol, G., 2013: September 26). The entire region feels “a sense of anger” toward Qatar, said Badr Abdellaty, a spokesman for Egypt’s Foreign Ministry (Hauslohner, A., 2013: November 13). The third event is the increasing interaction between the US and Iran after Rohani’s being elected in June 2013. Against the decreasing of the regional influence of Turkey and other Gulf States, these countries worry that the ambitions and regional hegemony of Iran will be difficult to contain.

Under such circumstance, these countries have to revert their policies back to conservative pragmatism (Idiz, S., 2013: November 5). On Syria issue, Turkey is no longer hardline. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu expressed that Syria crisis should be resolved based on three foundations: non-discrimination humanitarian to both governmental and opposing forces, diplomatic possible in Geneva II to make sure of peace and territorial integrity of Syria, and support the free elections in the country. Actually, his words show Turkey has begun to admit that the political transition of Syria should include Assad. Saudi Arabia also announced to downsize its cooperation with the US on Syria issue. The regional anti-Syria alliance is about to collapse. On Iran issue, Davutoglu visited Tehran on November 25 and Erdogan, Turkish prime minister, also paid a visit to Iran in January 2014. Diplomacy of Saudi Arabia to Syria has also undergone subtle adjustments. In February 2014, Prince Bandar, who strong supports the oppositions in Syria, has been dismissed by the King of Saudi Arabia and been replaced by Prince Naif who advocates to fight

against terrorism. On issues related to Egypt, Turkish President Abdullah Gul publicly stressed the importance of the relationship between Egypt and Turkey. Besides, he also began to amend the relationship between Turkey and Iraq. Davutoglu visited Iraq on November 13, paying a special trip to Najaf and Karbala, both of which are Shiite holy lands. The shift of power has been accomplished in Qatar on June 25, 2013 and new Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani has replaced the long-serving Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani. After the taking power of the new Emir, Tamim adjusts the previous diplomatic policies and diplomatic policy-makers, which can be viewed as a representation of the ebbing of the regional interventionism.

In short, the symmetric fragmentation in the Middle East distributes major countries within the region considerable strength. Although there are fluctuations in the power distribution, there is no country that can reshape the regional pattern alone. "Old" orders reoccur increasingly in the "new" Middle East, which is the general trend in this region. However, similar cases will not reoccur repeatedly. The Middle East upheaval has already damaged the state apparatus and the social class structure in the Middle East countries, and ordinary people in these countries have been fully awakened and mobilized. Coupled with other changes, the Middle East cannot return to the past completely.

III. Fragmentation of the Regional Power Structure Leads to Turbulence

The political ecology of the Middle East is quite sensitive and fragile. Due to the close correlation, the linkage effects of the political transition cannot be limited in states directly involved. Arab people rebel at the beginning of the unrest with the hope to cure the "Arab syndrome", stop the declining of the Arab world and achieve national rejuvenation. However, the situation did not go as smooth as they expected. Fueled by the foreign forces, great changes had gradually be replaced by great turbulence in the Middle East, which brought out increasing turbulent factors, fragmentation of the regional power and

a new period of turbulence of the whole region.

First, the conflicts among religious sects become growing obvious. Although the Islamic world can be divided to Shiite and Sunni, for a long time, regional conflicts are rarely caused by sectarian contradictions. After the Iraq War 2003, the "Shiite Crescent" emerged in the Middle East while the sectarian contradictions were still in an incubation period. After the outbreak of the Middle East upheaval in 2011, especially after the deepening of the Syria crisis, Syria has been a "radiation sources" of the conflicts: oppositions in Syria are supported by Sunni countries including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Even Hamas has shifted its focus from Syria and Iran to Egypt, Qatar, and even Turkey. The ultimate proposes of these outside forces are establishing neither a pluralistic democracy nor a multi-confessional country. Instead, they want to reshape the regional pattern of the Middle East, establishing and enlarging the "Sunni geopolitical arc" to undermine the regional influence of Iran (Maginnis, R., 2012: August 7). On the other side, the Assad regime has gained the support from Shiite states and forces in the Middle East. Iran tried its best to assist Syria governmental forces by providing weapons, money and military advisors. Fearing of being affected by a Syria ruled by Sunnis, Maliki government in Iraq pursues non-intervention policies on the surface while stands with Assad in the essence. It permits Iran to assist Syria by using its airspace. In the meantime, it also "turned a blind eye" on Shiite armed soldiers' taking part in the war in Syria (al-Salhy, S., 2013: June 19). Many Shiites received training and weapons in Iran and then participated in the war in Syria via Lebanon (al-Jaffal, O., 2013: October 29). Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has made a declaration, saying that "Syria is the resistance's main supporter, and the resistance cannot stand still and let takfiris [extremist Sunnis] break its backbone" (White, J., 2013: May 29). According to reports, Hezbollah alone has lost some 80 men in the fighting, which amounts to about 1% of its total fighting force (Kotsev, V., 2013: May 31). The Syria crisis has been a "clash within civilizations" (Crittenden, S., 2012: August 22). Syria locates in the center position of the breakline of the religious sects in the Middle East. Most of the times, internal conflicts in this country are caused and

worsened by external forces. In turn, these internal conflicts can also intensify the sectarian contradictions externally in countries such as Lebanon, Iran and Yemen, and bring out the direct contests between the Shiite power Iran and the Sunni power Saudi Arabia. "The 1,400-year-old great fitna (schism) between Islam's main branches, given to periodic eruptions, rumbles ominously again" (*Economist*, 2013: July 13).

The essence of the sectarian contradictions is the degeneration of the politics in the Middle East. There is still room left to maneuver the competitions for different kinds of "-ism" while no room for competitions for sects. What's more, in most of the countries in the Middle East, Sunnis and Shiites live together. The heating up of the sectarian contradictions will lead to internal frictions. The countries will be badly hurt and the region and even the whole world will be threatened then. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif described the conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites as the "biggest threat" to the international security on November 11, 2013.

Second, extremist terrorism forces have made unprecedented growth. After the Middle East upheaval, turbulence in the region led to increasingly power vacuum, which created hotbeds for the growth and spread of terrorism activities. Taking this chance, terrorism organizations, including Al-Qaeda, expanded their range of activities and established footholds, especially in regions come within nobody's jurisdiction, such as eastern Libya, northern Mali, Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and some areas in Syria. The terrorism forces, which had once been somewhat restrained, reemerge. There's an argument, saying that after experiencing the period of Al-Qaeda 1.0 marked by the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the period of Al-Qaeda 2.0 marked by the death of Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda has evolved a new generation: Al-Qaeda 3.0 (Keck, Z., 2013: October 23), which can be found in following aspects:

Firstly, countries that rarely involved in terrorism activities become new "heavens" for terrorism. In the first place, Syria has transformed from an oasis of peace to a hell of terrorism. The escalation of the crisis in Syria led to the declining of the controlling capability of the government. Extremists from terrorism organizations

including Al-Qaeda view the anti-Assad activities as “a new version of Afghan Jihad”. More than 80% militants in Syrian oppositions are foreigners. “Sources in the Syrian opposition estimate the number of non-Syrian jihadists at some 17,000, while European sources put the figure at 6,000” (Oudat, B., 2013: October 29). More than 90% attacking accidents in Syria are schemed by forces that closely related to Al-Qaeda. Jabhat al-Nusrah, an organization of Syria oppositions with the most combat effectiveness, has publicly declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda. In the second place, terrorism forces in Libya become increasingly serious. After the fall of Gadhafi, extremist forces become growing active in a rudderless Libya. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), established in 1980s, made a comeback and become an important military force in the country. Besides, many newly established extremist organizations, such as Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (LIMC), among others, also emerged. The expansion of their activities made Libya a new heaven for terrorism. In the third place, Egypt may become a new base for global Jihad. The worsening of the political situation in Egypt provides chances for terrorism networks to expand their activities. Egyptian members of Al-Qaeda, used to active in Afghanistan or Pakistan, rushed back to their homeland, which increased risks in the security situation of Egypt coupled with the restoration of liberty of the detained Islamists. The being ousted of Morsi in July 2013 sharpened the existing contradictions between secular and religious forces. More and more attacks targeted the army and security departments have been shown closely related to Al-Qaeda.

Secondly, the terrorism in countries including Iraq and Yemen are even more serious. Yemen has fallen into turbulence in 2010. From then on, the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has seized the opportunity to stage comeback and once controlled large tracts of land. Currently, extremist forces are mainly active in the southern Yemeni province of Abyan, She Bowa, Al Bayda, La Haji and Hadhramaut. According to the conservative estimates, there are as many as 3,000 to 5,000 armed soldiers in Yemen now. Since the year 2013, many assassinations, attacks and kidnaps targeted governmental officials, military camps and foreigners have taken place in Yemen and many

terrorists have been “exported” to areas including Syria. The resurgence of the terrorism activates can also be reflected in Iraq. Two events in 2011, the outbreak of the Syria crisis and the withdrawing of the US army, stimulated the reemergence of the terrorists, which worsen the counter-terrorism situation in Iraq. As many as 7,000 civilians have been killed from January to October 2013 and 16,000 have been injured. At the low point of violence in Iraq in early 2011, the country suffered about 300 major security incidents a month. Throughout 2013, the monthly total of incidents has regularly topped 1,200 (Knights, M., 2013: October 3).

Viewing from the long term, the terrorism in the Middle East will continue to grow for the reasons as follows: Firstly, the influence of the Middle East upheaval will not stop in short term. Transitions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya will still be quite difficult, which contains central governments’ efforts in counter-terrorism activities. At the same time, increasing disappointment and anger among the public make it possible for the ideas spreading and the recruitment of members of the extremist organizations. Secondly, the political Islamization boosts the growth of the extremist religious forces. The Middle East upheaval also helps the development of the Islam forces in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and some other countries, as well as the extremist religious thought and forces in these countries. While governmental forces in countries including Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait’ suppressing on the Muslim Brotherhood may stimulate the latter to take the risks. Only several hours after the overthrow of Morsi, Islamists in the Sinai Peninsula began to talk about a war to Egyptian security forces. Thirdly, after his coming to power, US president Obama lower US voices on counter-terrorism, making it no longer the main target of US activities in the Middle East. Coupled with the limited effects of the “UAV counter-terrorism” methods, it can be boiled down to a prediction that there will be no fatal blow to terrorism forces in the near future. Finally, the struggle strategy of Al-Qaeda is also advancing with the times. To cope with the suppression from the counter-terrorism forces and the changes of the situation, terrorism organizations including Al-Qaeda are also debugging their measures. Their organizational

form has transformed to a multi-level global terrorist network. Also, they have adopted a “localized” strategy to provide electricity, food, water and medical care service to areas they control, which gain many local’s recognition and support. Against such backdrop, “Al-Qaeda, once a barely known group 12 years ago, has now become a stakeholder in the future of entire Middle Eastern countries” (Baroud, R., 2013: October 24). However, due to their extreme advocates and destructive practices, these forces are more a showstopper that stands in the way of stability and international security than a stakeholder.

Thirdly, the trend of fragmentation of the geopolitical map emerges. Most of current Arab countries are “man-made” by British and French colonists; hence, contradictions among tribes, sects and nations within these countries are quite serious. For a long time, these countries maintain their stability and unity by authoritarian regimes. However, after the Middle East upheaval, separatism has gained markets because the overthrown of the strongman regimes brought out the covered contradictions among nations and tribe into open. In Yemen, new government has not as much ability to control as its predecessor after the regime change and there have been voices advocating for separation in southern part of the country. On October 12, 2013 (the anniversary in 1967 of the independence of former South Yemen), tens of thousands of Yemenis took to the streets of Eden in the South of the country, mostly demanding secession from the north (Baroud, R., 2013: October 16). Previously, Libya was consisted by three parts: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan. The fall of Gadhafi re-simulated the grudges of these three parts and competitions on power and oil. Cyrenaica advocates the federalism, so as to retain 75% of the crude oil exports. Since the war in 2003, Iraq has been unable to recover from the turbulence. Currently, within the country, there are increasing militias; killings are common between Sunnis and Shiites; security forces are very weak. Iraq becomes a failed state and totally dysfunctional (Lendman, S., 2013: November 3). Numerous segments of Iraq’s politic bodies - Kurdish, Sunni Arab, and Shia - are exasperated over the government’s inability to address political or economic inequities, and are talking seriously about partition (Knights, M., 2013: May 15).

Among them, the Kurdish problem is the one that the most worth noting. Kurdish people are one of the four main ethnics (others are Arabs, Persians and Turks), but they have long been failed to establish their own ethnic country, that's why Kurdish independence movements break out one after another. The Middle East upheaval provides an unprecedented historical opportunity to the Kurdish independence movements. Especially after the worsening of the Syria crisis, to revenge Turkey's support to oppositions, the Assad regime indulged the Kurdish autonomy in al-Hasakah Province. Currently, the Democratic Union Party, a Kurdish political party, has established its own armed forces, controlled 60% of oilfields and began to export oil itself (Glioti, A., 2013: May 16). On November 11, 2013, Kurdish people in Syria established their autonomous institutions, which reflects a growing trend of independence and causes spillovers in Turkey.

In March 2013, Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) signed an agreement with the government on withdrawing from Turkish camps in May 2013. However, it announced the suspension of this agreement in period from September to October 2013 (Tol, G., 2013: September 26). Intelligence in Iran began to meet with the PKK leaders, persuading them to give up PKK peace process with Turkey at the price of supporting its independence in northern Syria (Tol, G., 2013: November 1). Among the tendencies, Iraqi Kurdish independence is the one that gained most attention. Iraqi Kurdish regional government has its independent administrative agencies and the military forces. Kurdish region has been a country *de facto*. Since January 2013, regardless of the objections from the central government, the Kurdish regional government directly exported crude oil by tankers and signed oil and gas development contracts with companies from countries including Turkey, Russia, and the UAE. Being the economic autonomy, Kurdish regional government has taken the political independence one step further. It is worth noting that Kurdish forces in the Middle East also appear a trend of horizontal integration. For the first time in modern Kurdish history, on July 22, 2013, representatives from Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria met together at Erbil, a Kurdish city in northern Iraq, negotiating on the

foundation of the Kurdish National Congress.

The geopolitical split has long been the deep root for the long-existing turbulence in the Middle East. Current Arab world has fallen into spilt and even separated, which means that the Middle East will encounter a new round of turbulence.

IV. Declining of the US Offensive Attitude and Dominance in the Middle East

Prior to the Middle East upheaval, the US strategic contraction trend has become increasingly evident within the region. Objectively, after a series of wars and the 2008 financial crisis, both the hard and soft power of the US have been significantly undermined. Therefore, it is difficult to maintain its expansionary policies in the Middle East for the US. Subjectively, US willingness of controlling the Middle East also has been declined. It is said from analysts that the US involvement in the Middle East was mainly for containing the former Soviet Union, obtaining the Middle East oil and maintaining Israeli security. The situation has changed now in the region; the US has no frightening rivals present day; it reduced its dependence remarkably on Middle East oil with the result of North American energy revolution; its ally Israel's security environment has been greatly improved (Miller, A., 2013: October 17). However, the 2011 Middle East upheaval and the chaos of political transition subsequent highlight the increasing failure of the US Middle East policy and promote the speed up of its pace of strategic contraction. First of all, due to political turmoil and economic stagnation after regime changes in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, there are less and less allies within the region that the US could rely. Especially that the repeatedly turmoil in Egypt created the US a dilemma and triggered a strong anti-American sentiment in Egyptian government (Lavi, L. & Shamni, N., 2013: September 13). Secondly, US instigating of regime changes have encouraged the development of the extremist forces in the region. Anti-US armed forces appear in countries such as Yemen and Libya one after another. Following US ambassador to Libya's being killed in September 2012, the US closed 22 embassies and

consulates in West Asia and North Africa in August 2013 out of the afraid of terrorist attacks. Thirdly, the still existing Assad regime and the oppositions backed by the West will be on parallel tracks in short term. Syria becomes a “terrorist camp”, which makes the US policy toward Syria even more powerless. US military intervention has been objected by China and Russia. The US also faces a dilemma that arming the oppositions may encourage the extremist forces while it is not reconciled to resolve the problem through political solutions. To sum up, after the upheaval, the US has been losing capability to control the situation in the Middle East, as former US ambassador to Saudi Freeman lamented that “we have lost intellectual command and practical control of the many situations unfolding there and we must acknowledge the reality that we no longer have or can expect to have the clout we once did in the region” (Dreyfuss, B., 2013: November 6). In July and August 2013, Susan E. Rice, national security adviser of the US, took the responsibility of planning the future Middle East policies for the US. The president’s goal, said Rice, is to avoid having events in the Middle East swallow his foreign policy agenda, eschewing the use of force, except to respond to acts of aggression against the United States or its allies, disruption of oil supplies, terrorist networks, or weapons of mass destruction (Landler, M., 2013: October 26). In this context, the US steps up its pace of strategic contraction. Since 2013, such trend has been mainly reflected in two hotspots: Firstly, the US has never been military involved in Syria crisis. Even after the Syrian chemical weapons incident’s coming to light, Obama ignored the commitment that the chemical weapon is the redline of force using, and urged US allies to accept Syria’s making peace by giving up chemical weapons. Secondly, on the issue of Iran, regardless of regional allies’ opposition, the US responded positively to the goodwill that released by Rouhani. The two presidents have finally realized the communication and made a telephone call for the first time; foreign ministers of the two countries have met for the first time; even the Iran nuclear issue has reached a preliminary agreement on November 24, 2013. The US continues to shrink its Middle East strategy, which undermine US influence and dominance in the region in turn. It can be manifested in two aspects:

On the one hand, US regional allies promote their de-US tendency. US strategic contraction, especially the easing of the US-Iraq relationship, threatens of the surviving of US allies in the region and forces them to find another way out. Israel worries that the easement of the relationship between the US and Iran may destroy the Western “sanctions system” against Iran and the regional anti-Iranian camp, and enhance Iran’s regional influence. Out of such consideration, Israel has been complaining that US Middle East policies fail to keep faith, and do not regard to its responsibilities and obligations to allies (Rosner, S., 2013: September 11). Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman publicly said that the US was no longer reliable on November 20, 2013. Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia also fear that the Obama administration’s strategic desire of “pivot to Asia” may leave them to face the twin tides of Iranian expansion and Islamic extremism on their own (Kahl, C. & Stokes, J., 2013: October 31). Coupled with the shale gas revolution which made the energy relationship between the US and the Gulf States transformed from complementary relationship to the competition, countries like Saudi Arabia have no choice but to alienate the US and find another way out. Former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar said on October 22, 2013 that the US-Saudi relationship would occur “significant change”. Egypt has also been alienating the US gradually. Egyptian media holds that Egypt should no longer succumb to the US and should draw Russia closer. Billboards with Putin’s photo and captioned “Bye-bye America” were have been put up at a pro-Al-Sisi demonstration in Alexandria (Lavi, L. & Shamni, N., 2013: September 13). In mid-November of the same year, Egypt receipted the visit of Russia foreign minister and defense minister, which has been seen as an important signal of Egypt’s “turning to Russia from the US”. Turkey and the US also have increasingly divergent views on the Egypt, Syria and Israel-Palestine issue (Bilgrami, M., 2013: October 16). Provided the US opposition, Turkey still planed to purchase Chinese anti-missile system, which highlights Turkey’s tendency of being away from the US. Estrangement between the US and its allies makes the US influence within the region further decline.

On the other hand, Russia and other major powers expand their influence by the occasion. US strategic contraction in the Middle East creates opportunities for powers to “fill in the blanks”, which can be represented by Russia’s return to the Middle East. In recent years, Russia’s national strength has been recovered and its returning to the Middle East has become more obvious after the Middle East upheaval and US strategic contraction. On Syria issue, Russia vetoed Western sanctions against Syria on Security Council for several times with China, and strongly opposed the use of force to Syria. Just after the exposure of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, Russia proposed the “chemical weapons for peace” plan and removed the risk of war of into invisibility, which paved the way for a powerful Russia’s resurgence on the world stage (Aziz, J., 2013: November 12). By this chance, Russia also strengthened its comprehensive contacts with Egypt. The Russian “Varyag” missile cruiser arrived in Alexandria port on November 11, 2013, which marked the first time for Russian warships to park in that harbor since 1992. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu jointly visited Egypt on November 13-14, which displayed Russia’s strategic intent of re-expanding influence in the Middle East. Besides, EU countries such as the UK and France have also put more efforts in the Middle East. The UK regards Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel as the key targets of its “economic diplomacy”. A 1 billion-euro (\$1,383,400,000) arms sale contract has been signed in July 2013 between France and the UAE. And in August, France got the Saudi warships upgrade project which values more than 1 billion euros. France also interfered with the Iran nuclear negotiation in Geneva. On November 17, during his visit to Israel, French President Francois Hollande expressed his support to Israel and opposition to Iran, which won praise in Israel. The UK also announced the resumption of its agency diplomatic relations with Iran on October 8, seeking to return Iran by taking advantage of easement of the Iran nuclear problem.

It needs to be pointed out that the US has just shrunk its strategy instead of retreating it from the Middle East. In future, the US will remain the most important external player in the Middle East and it will still intervene in the major regional affairs selectively. US regional

allies cannot be separated from US support in spite of their discontents toward the US. Other major powers in the world are powerless in providing the Middle East more support (Shoori, M., 2013: October 30). Their expansions of the influence are aimed to more interests instead of trying to replace the US. Such situation determines that the regional pattern in the Middle East will still be composited by one super power and several major powers.

V. Conclusion

The political transitions in the Middle East should have been a new attempt of the Arab world to pursue the historical renaissance. However, due to the lack of correct political ideology and guidance from advanced parties, these political transitions have entered a dilemma. Most of the impacts of these transitions are negative on the geopolitical situation in the Middle East. However, the history always develops with turns and twists. The dilemma that the political transitions in the Middle East faces is just a moment in the long-term history. The transitions will continue to move forward in difficulties, which determines that its impacts on the geopolitical situation of the region are far from ended.

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