

## Briefing Memo

Security situation of the Middle East fallen into a complex crisis

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### Introduction

Since early 2014, the situation in the Middle East has been marked by a series of unprecedented events that are clearly extremely difficult to understand based on a theory of international relations premised on modern sovereign states in the conventional Western model. For example, in early June of 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a terrorist organization with origins in Al-Qaeda, took control of Mosul, an important city in Northern Iraq following the withdrawal of occupying American forces (December 2011). Then, on the 29th of the same month, it proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic State (hereinafter referred to as “IS”), declaring its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to be representative of the Prophet Mohammed and the caliph, a title meaning the leader of the ummah or the Islamic community.

While remaining outmatched by a coalition of the willing from Europe and America and the Persian Gulf states, and since September 30, 2015, exposed to fierce aerial bombing by the Russian military, IS has denied the national boundaries between the modern sovereign states of the Middle East, which were established mainly by France and Britain following the First World War to divide the Arab region of the Ottoman Empire, one of the defeated powers. IS has continued to control a stable region spanning Syria and Iraq until the present. IS denies all modern national boundaries and Western values such as liberalism and democracy to proclaim extremely pre-modern logic including the revival of the caliphate and slavery. But, in fact, it is a pre-modern and post-modern hybrid organization that embraces a major contradiction between theory and practice, as seen in its continued conduct of jihad on behalf of what it deems the “opposition to the crusades” by recruiting fighters from around the world through their skillful use of social media, the Internet, and other modern information communication technologies developed by the West.

The Paris terrorist attack of November 13, 2015, which is still fresh in the memories of the Japanese people, was a tragic event in which more than 130 innocent citizens lost their lives as victims of so-called “home-grown terror” that was planned by second-generation immigrant IS sympathizers born in Belgium. These terrorists who sympathize with IS have attempted to sow fear of indiscriminate large scale murder of ordinary citizens in Christian societies in Europe and America by boldly attacking “soft targets” such as restaurants on a Friday evening, theaters, and a soccer stadium.

The shock created by this incident was characterized by the way it demonstrated that the battlefields of Jihad by IS are definitely not limited to the Middle East, but can be spread easily around the world

in whatever way they desire. In this sense, it is probably true to say that the Paris terrorist attacks reminded people around the world of the asymmetrical warfare between state and non-state actors, or in other words, the exposure of modern international society to post-modern threats. For people like ourselves, who are members of modern societies that built upon an unquestioning acceptance Western values, these reports of pre-modern anachronisms such as the slaughter of prisoners and enslavement of “infidel” women by IS, which are actions which flout international humanitarian laws, should be extremely noteworthy in that they make us more aware of the threat of post-modern terrorism.

### **What are the “multiple crises” that are now advancing in the Middle East?**

Masayuki Yamauchi, who is an expert on the state of the Islamic world in the Middle East, has stated, in his recent work, *From Multiple Crises in the Middle East to World War Three – Tragedy of Islam* (PHP-Shinsho, Feb. 2016), that since the military intervention in Syria in September 2015 by Russia mentioned earlier and Russia’s annexation of the Crimea in March 2014, President Putin is clearly determined to restore the authority and sphere of influence that Russia enjoyed in the Soviet period, and is intensifying the Second Cold War between states in the Middle East, with the West on one side, and Russia and Iran on the other (id. page 8).

Certainly, since 2011, when the United States changed its policy and withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq, as pledged by President Obama, there has been a change in the United States’ foreign and security policy priorities since the Gulf War of 1991, which were characterized by a U.S. focus on East Asia and its disengagement from the Middle East. Regarding the future road to peace in Syria where a fierce civil war has already caused more than 250,000 deaths and continues to produce countless refugees and internally displaced persons, no matter how you look at it, there is no doubt that a “Second Cold War” situation is emerging, as pointed out by Yamauchi, between the West, which cannot mobilize ground forces to the scene, despite seeking the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime, and Russia and Iran, which clearly continue to support the Assad regime, which is a puppet of their own countries, as they also indiscriminately attack not only IS, but also the opposition forces that are supported by the West.

However, on July 14, 2015, the West signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the new regime led by President Hassan Rouhani, a member of Iran’s moderate conservative faction. The JCPOA is a so-called final agreement concerning the issue of nuclear development in Iran, which has continued to be a concern of the international community since it was discovered in 2002. As a result of JCPOA, for 15 years, nuclear development in Iran will be limited to extending its breakthrough period for possession of nuclear weapons from 3 months to 1 year, following which deregulation will be approved, giving Iran membership in the group of so-called nuclear threshold states that includes Japan and Germany.

For two Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia and Israel, which are U.S. allies that have been in vigorous opposition to Iran, this appears to be a completely unexpected betrayal by the United States. This is the result of the fact there is no way to prevent Saudi Arabia and Israel from believing that, in order to stabilize the situation in Iraq and Syria while totally disengaging, the Obama administration ignored their interests to begin to establish friendly relationships with Iran, which is in a position to

strongly influence both countries.

In contrast to the geopolitical position of Iran, which is a participant in the struggle for regional hegemony between Sunni and Shia groups, particularly in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia still cannot extricate itself from its political weakness, specifically its undemocratic character as a rentier state that is overly dependent on income from exporting oil. Led by Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz, who was inaugurated in January 2015, and Minister of Defense Mohammad, who is his son and Crown Prince, a coalition of the willing, composed of Arab Sunni forces from the Gulf States, have intervened militarily in the civil war in Yemen since March 26, 2015 in order to attack the Houthis, a Shia dominated rebel force that is active in Yemen and has the support of Iran. This is likely nothing other than a hard line policy by Saudi Arabia that signifies a reconsideration of the regional security structure that was formerly committed to the United States and is aimed at militarily confronting Iran, which was emerging as a power in the Persian Gulf.

As a result of JCPOA, harsh economic sanctions imposed by the U.N. and the West on Iran were rescinded in January 2016. Judging from the crude oil production and export capacity of Iran prior to the sanctions, Iran will increase its daily production by about 1 million barrels per day in 2016. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has been backed into a corner by harsh financial problems resulting from a slump in crude oil prices caused by a slumping world economy in China and elsewhere since last year and in the shale oil and gas revolution in the United States. At the present time, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is unable to undertake a cooperative reduction of production to maintain prices, and Saudi Arabia, which must devote its efforts to maintaining its share in the face of shale oil and increased production by Iran since its return to the market, can no longer play the role of swing producer as it has in the past. In brief, OPEC has, under present circumstances, already lost its appropriate crude-oil price maintenance function. This situation signifies that, because of the harsh financial difficulties it faces, it is already difficult for the Saudi royal family to maintain its pledge that, as a rentier state, it will not ask citizens to pay taxes and other public charges in return for not being allowed to participate in politics. Through the country's confrontation with Iran, there may emerge signs of the Saudi royal family creating employment for its young workers, abandoning its role as a rentier state, and gradually moving towards democracy, all of which are key to its future survival.

Thus, the state of "multiple crises" that is currently developing in the Middle East is, in a certain sense, the "Second Cold War" between the West, and Russia and Iran as defined by Yamauchi, and also signifies the phenomena of the complex intersection of a "post-modern war" on the side of modern sovereign states against asymmetrical threats such as that shown primarily in its anti-IS strategy.

In January 2016, Saudi Arabia executed a leader of the Shia anti-government movement, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, along with other subversives, prompting attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran, which in turn severed diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia, a leading Sunni country, and Iran, a leading Shia country. There is a danger that the resulting crisis could ignite the Fertile Crescent (Iraq, Syria, and the Sinai Peninsula) where the sphere of IS control is expanding. This also has implications in terms of the struggle for regional hegemony among religious factions that is specific to the Middle East, which is difficult to understand within a framework that simply positions this as being part of a

“Second Cold War.”

It is also necessary to seriously consider the significance of a Turkish fighter jet shooting down a Russian military aircraft on November 24, 2015 because the Russian aircraft violated Turkey’s air space. This is because it is extremely inconceivable that President Erdogan of Turkey, who had previously supported IS, albeit in secret, before changing tact and attacking IS under U.S. pressure, would have shot down the Russian military aircraft as a simple counterattack to prevent the Russian military from indiscriminately attacking the Syrian rebels (particularly the Turkmens who form a buffer zone inside Syria between Turkey and the Kurds).

This is because it is also likely that by exacerbating Turkey’s confrontation with Russia by shooting down this aircraft, President Erdogan would run the risk of President Putin enforcing a series of economic sanctions on Turkey that might frustrate his plan to lay a pipeline to carry Russian natural gas through Turkey, which would be profitable for the country. This problem too can fully be deemed an event reflecting the “multiple crises” developing in the security environment of the present-day Middle East.

#### **Conclusion—Outlook for the “multiple crises” in the security environment of the Middle East**

Assuming that, as argued here, “multiple crises” are now occurring in the Middle East, how will this change the regional security environment? First, as Yamauchi has indicated, both Iraq and Syria, where the West, as well as Russia and Iran, continue to fight IS, may be split into three or four. At the same time, in Libya or Yemen, which are countries more easily divided than Tunisia (ancient Carthage in the Roman Empire) or Egypt, which have succeeded in maintaining geographical and cultural unity dating back to their ancient civilizations, it is likely that internal strife will continue, until these states finally collapse. It is presumed that in Libya, IS forces, and in Yemen, the Houthis, an Iranian puppet force, and Al-Qaeda will make further inroads aiming to fill this power void.

The dismemberment or collapse of the modern states of the Middle East will expand Islamic extremism or nihilism among young people inside and outside the region, which brings with it a risk of exacerbating terrorism and the refugee crisis in the European Union. Furthermore, Europe, which is directly confronted with these issues, may see an intensification in the swing to the political far-right and support for the expulsion of Muslims, as seen in the assertions made by Marine Le Pen, the leader of France’s National Front Party, an anti-immigration party.

There is a danger that, as a result of the effective failure of Turkey’s foreign policy of having zero problems with neighboring countries, which is based on the diplomatic challenges of membership in the European Union and neo-Ottomanism, the Erdogan administration, which is part of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey’s moderate Islamic party, will deepen the isolation of Turkey from the outside world due to a trend of rising nationalism as expressed in anti-Russian and anti-Kurd attitudes and the strengthening of internal control. It is ultimately likely that Turkey will attempt to forge uncomfortable partnerships with the United States or Saudi Arabia.

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We hope this article would help you to understand complex national security issues.

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