TRANSNATIONAL TRENDS:
Middle Eastern and Asian Views

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INTRODUCTION

The Henry L. Stimson Center’s Regional Voices: Transnational Challenges project has conducted a detailed and multifaceted inquiry over a period of one year in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The present volume is a partial reflection of this exercise to understand the true dimensions and significance of transnational threats, challenges, and opportunities, as seen by those on the front lines. Our inquiry has taken the form of protracted individual dialogue and intellectual cooperation, research into the state of knowledge and opinion, group discussions, and organization of a two-day conference in each region, bringing together experts and thinkers from various countries and disciplines. Our interlocutors have spoken not only as observers, but also as potential or actual victims or beneficiaries of transnational developments, and as integral members of the affected societies. Our discussions with hundreds of interlocutors in the three regions have created a network of institutions and individuals with whom we will continue to maintain ongoing dialogue and intellectual cooperation on the changing security landscape.

We have drawn the parameters inclusively to ensure the inclusion of all that is relevant to an understanding of the prospects of social instability or conflict. Our areas of inquiry have included threats or challenges such as those posed by environmental change, public health crises, water shortages or conflicts, demographic trends, labor and refugee migration, competition for energy, poor education, or inadequate livelihood generation. We are interested in these to the extent that they do, or have the potential to, affect security and the security policy agenda of states in the region. We have therefore maintained equal emphasis on security as traditionally defined and on human or nontraditional security. We have sought to understand the common and complex sources and determinants of political and social stability, and of the processes and pace of change in societies. We have sought to avoid a labored “securitization” of threats to human welfare, but have been sensitive to where threats to human security also constitute threats to the security of societies and states.

Our interlocutors and collaborators have included academics, retired officials, lawyers, physicians, engineers, scientists, activists, and philosophers. Their fields of expertise have included intelligence, terrorism, law enforcement, conflict resolution, environment, water, energy, public health, migration, economics, public
finance, banking, commerce, fisheries, maritime issues, communications media, philosophy, and religion.

What do experts from a variety of disciplines and countries in the Middle East and Asia have to say about these trends? Which long-term trends are the most significant in explaining the current predicaments of their nations, their regions, and indeed the world as seen by them? What in their judgment constitute the determinants of these or of new developments that they anticipate in the future? What will their societies and their regions look like in the coming decade or two? What factors will either accelerate or inhibit any of these trends?

Some of the trends identified by experts from the regions are common to all three regions, and a good deal broader in their effects. Others are predominantly significant for one of the regions, or even one of its subregions or individual countries, but are nonetheless worth noting because of their potential effects on neighboring regions and countries.

Certain conclusions deserve particular attention: some because they recur often, both in the published literature and in conversations; others because of the pointed and forceful way in which they are urged by experts in the regions upon US interlocutors, as essential to proper understanding of the regions.

It is frequently noted that the United States is less influential in world affairs than might be expected from its prestige and the resources and capabilities at its disposal. It is frequently suggested that this stems from incomprehension both of the nature of global security challenges and of the ways that they are understood by people in other political and cultural contexts.

Therefore, the emphasis of the Regional Voices project has been on listening carefully to varied local perspectives on transnational security challenges, and on noting clear themes that emerge. Care was taken to solicit new voices to the policy conversations—voices that have not been much heard in US discourse about these issues. Particular attention was devoted to solicitation of dissident voices that may not comport with the emerging global consensus on politics and economics shared by the US, but which reflect recurring concerns and anxieties in various societies. We deemed these important reflections and determinants of political stability and prospective security threats.

This listening exercise has not only required a respectful consideration of unconventional ideologies or policy perspectives. It has also depended for its effectiveness on a degree of agnosticism about the conclusions that one wants to reach. It has therefore set out not to solicit prescriptions for solution but rather to drive toward a deeper level of diagnosis. It has eschewed conclusions in order to create platforms for the expression and discussion of expert experience and reflective thinking.
THE GEOGRAPHY OF POLITICS

The regions that we have worked in are those in which US policy has taken a high degree of interest in recent years. They are also those in which US intentions are viewed with perhaps the highest degree of skepticism and distrust. These regions are of course also a substantial portion of the realm of Islam. Muslims either constitute the majority in the region (the Middle East), or majorities of major nations (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia), or substantial and important minorities in non-Muslim nations (India, Sri Lanka). Thus, Islam has inevitably been a significant dimension of our inquiry, reflecting the fact that opinion in the regions treats it as the dominant terms of reference or as a perceived source of challenge. The high degree of US interest in the realm of Islam stems from the perceived origin there of terrorism directed against the West, and from the related concern with a sense of ideological challenge from Islam.

However, we have not focused our inquiry on the dimensions of Islamic ideology or terrorism. Although our regions are of interest significantly because of these twin concerns, we have sought to understand the regions in their totality of economic, political, ideological, scientific, and environmental experience; to understand the security landscape in its full context.

Such multidimensional understanding is also important because these regions evince some of the most acute instances of nontraditional security threats and threats to human security. Adequate understanding of and response to those global human security challenges demands attention to the particular form they take in these regions. Livelihood generation for demographic youth bulges, water scarcity, resource depletion, environmental degradation, natural disaster, climate change, pandemic disease, rapid and uneven economic development, and social conflict—all these and more are found in particularly acute form in these regions.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF CULTURE AND ECONOMICS

A traditional definition of the regions has been the starting point for our inquiry in its first year. We have held two-day meetings in each region that have principally brought together experts from various countries in that region. The agenda set for those meetings, the working papers prepared for those meetings, and the articulation of the research agenda following those colloquia, have been largely in terms of a Middle Eastern, South Asian, or Southeast Asian framework.

However, we have inevitably encountered the need for flexibility in how the regions are defined. In the Middle East, we find as much to distinguish within the region as between the region and its neighbors. Certainly sources of unity are found in the common Arab language, history, and institutions of the Gulf, the Levant, and North Africa. Nonetheless, the internal differences among these three
areas are as significant. In order to render the inquiry manageable, we have not sought to engage experts from, or address issues in, North Africa (with the notable exception of Egypt). Even within the area spanning Egypt and the Gulf, there is a clear distinction to be noted. The economically dynamic Gulf, with its capital surplus derived from fossil fuel, participates in an entirely distinct section of the global economy from the Levant, the Mashriq, the “old Middle East.” The latter, with its relatively large populations, its more cosmopolitan histories but less modern contemporary ways of life, its more sophisticated political systems but much deeper economic crisis, and crisis of political legitimacy, can seem like another world entirely.

In South Asia, there is a palpable sense of divergence between the life experiences of an India (and to an extent Pakistan) rapidly joining the global economy, and the other countries of the region stuck in a combination of underdevelopment and political dysfunction. In Southeast Asia, one is repeatedly reminded of the difference between the older members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the “Asian tigers” with their first world standards of living, and the newer members, such as Burma and Cambodia, whose third world condition is undeniable.

As important as the variations within the regions are the sources of unity between each region and its proximate regions. The wealthy countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, with their capital surpluses and global investment strategies, are significant players in the economies of North Africa, and South and East Asia. South Asia is a huge presence in the Arab/Persian Gulf, by virtue of Indian and Pakistani investment and the very large number of South Asian migrant workers there, whose presence has stamped the culture and intellectual life of the Gulf. The Gulf also hosts significant numbers of Southeast Asian migrant workers. Afghanistan, not traditionally considered part of the Middle East, has historically shared cultural traditions with Iran, and today shares ideological traditions, as both recipient and generator, with the Middle East. Simultaneously, political and ideological developments in Afghanistan have had and continue to have deep effects on Pakistan and India. Iran, very much a Gulf power and a substantial political and ideological influence in the Arab Middle East, is simultaneously very much a part of Indian and Pakistani strategic and economic calculations about future energy pipelines.

Burma clearly figures in the traditional and nontraditional security calculations of both its South Asian and its Southeast Asian neighbors. Insurgencies, human trafficking, narcotics trade, HIV/AIDS transmission, and forest degradation span its borders east and west, giving India and Bangladesh, Thailand and the other Mekong Basin countries equal stake in its affairs. Security experts in our South Asian discussions, particularly Indians concerned about Northeast India, treated Burma as a South Asian country, whereas our meetings in Southeast Asia, coinciding with the monks’ revolt there, looked at Burma as ASEAN’s problem. Through-
out, we were reminded of Burma’s role as the cockpit of contention for fossil fuels and other natural resources among India, China, and ASEAN. Southeast Asians in turn see the roles of Australian, Japanese, Chinese, Indian, American, Korean, and other outside actors, official and private, as almost equal in importance to the roles of those within ASEAN.

**OVERARCHING THEMES**

Over the course of our year-long inquiry, we spoke and worked with a wide variety of experts. These included technical experts as well as experts in policy analysis and strategic thinking. Notable as a common theme in our discussions in all regions and on all subjects was the extent to which our interlocutors agreed that those who wield power in their societies and are responsible for social outcomes are only occasionally influenced by the knowledge and analyses of technical experts such as scientists or economists. This theme is closely related to the observation that few political systems operate to address long-term or strategic challenges, and that the pursuit of short-term political interests is paramount.

Identity in the age of globalization presents many paradoxes. We have heard about how identities change along the path to citizenship and empowerment of individuals, how primordial identities can conflict with, be sharpened by, or even contribute to the process of transformation in a society or region, and how states and other governance structures and processes must cope with the realities of citizens holding onto more than one identity. Religion, Islam in particular but others too, is a critical component of the identity struggles under way, but it is not the only significant source of identity, and it does not lend itself to a single pattern or explanation.

Rapid change and the dislocations it causes are significant factors. Multiple processes of change are occurring at once. Throughout the three regions, birth rates, labor migration, economic growth, the spread of disease, and natural resource endowments, to name the most important, are all subject to dramatic fluctuation and change. These processes interact with each other in powerful ways, so that the public policy dilemma often consists of deciding where to begin, with underlying causes or with more acute manifestations of a societal imbalance. The management of natural resources—water, energy, forests, fish—figured prominently in the discussions and generated new questions about sovereignty, governance, and the global commons.

As intriguing as common patterns of what does get discussed are issues on which there is a common silence. One example is the question of gender. In gatherings of experts from the regions and of Western experts on the regions’ transnational threats, we would hear early in the discussion a reminder, often from more than one participant, that the question of gender is a key consideration. This reminder would be reiterated at the conclusion of a meeting. However, despite the presence of
women in the groups, and of scholars and technical experts on sustainable develop-
ment, the intervening discussion rarely if at all turned to the gender dimension.

There can be little question that the most prominent issue in the global discussion
of environmental perils, and particularly in the developed world’s perception of
salient global issues, is global climate change. We found that the issue is accorded
far less importance as a major source of concern in conversations among experts
and security thinkers in the three regions. Even the secondary effects of climate
change, about which societies might be more immediately concerned, since these
affect core concerns such as water and food security, engage only occasional in-
terest. Climate change scientists are of course intensely active today, and particu-
larly so in India and Bangladesh. In all three regions, general science and
technology thinkers and experts take a keen interest in new technologies related to
climate change, energy economists address the issue as significant, and political
thinkers and analysts take the greatest interest in the diplomatic issues and sover-
eignty concerns arising from the search for global consensus on its mitigation.
What appears to be rudimentary is the integration of the work of climate change
scientists into discourse in other areas of human security.

Where issues of interest and concern in the region coincide with those in the West
and the US, we have often found that the approach is fundamentally different. For
example, there is an urgent sense that the West, the US in particular, must under-
stand that issues such as terrorism or extremist ideology are inextricably related to
core political and economic developments in societies. It is also necessary to bet-
ter understand the important distinctions among the various facets (political organ-
izing, terror, intellectual reformation) of the worldwide Islamic awakening.

It is repeatedly suggested that the distinction between terrorism and insurgency
needs emphasis; that the former should be defined by its anti-social means and its
cover character, and the latter by its social and political context. There is often an
accompanying sense that repressive or avaricious local elites cynically use this
conflation for their own interests. It is pointedly suggested that insurgencies using
Muslim identity or Islamic slogans, such as those in northwest Pakistan, southern
Thailand, or the southern Philippines, would be better understood in terms of their
common origins with others not explicitly Muslim or Islamic; common origins in
poor policy, group discrimination, graft, and natural or cultural despoliation by
plutocratic interests.

We are repeatedly reminded that internal security and political stability cannot be
understood without reference to economic and social inequalities and develop-
mental trends. These are often reflections of global economic policies or global
economic interests, with a significant US nexus, that set at naught the perspectives
and political consensus of the states and societies concerned. Alienated groups
have social and economic aspirations and demands that can be addressed as mat-
ters of social policy. Policy makers should attend to these in those terms rather
than focusing on the ideological rhetoric that articulates those demands. US rhet-
oric on terrorism and militant Islam, perceived as simplistic and brittle, encourages or presses states and elites to ignore this reality.

The State: Part of the Problem, Part of the Solution

A major theme raised by our interlocutors in all three regions is the problematical role of the state. The state is seen as both part of the problem and part of the solution for transnational challenges. Interlocutors are simultaneously highly critical of authoritarian and unresponsive states and concerned about states that evince weak capacity. They want states to have greater political will and greater competence for intervening to prevent catastrophic harm. The non-state sector, particularly the rise of civil society actors, is not seen as a substitute for competent states, though it is seen as a useful supplement to state capacity.

In all three regions there is concern about the rapid and bewildering evolution of the role of the state. It is often seen as the source of conflict and insecurity, rather than protection against them. One hears about the deliberate withdrawal of the state from its function as provider of social welfare or economic regulation; its deteriorated technical or administrative capacity; its lack of political will; its capture by private interests through graft or nepotism; and its role in implementing policies that increase economic and social inequality. On the other hand, when a society requires institutional and technical means to respond to pandemics or natural disasters, to conserve environmental goods, to engage in economic reform and regulation to attract investment and generate livelihoods, or to restrain predatory economic actors, the instinct remains to ask how the state can be re-capacitated for these purposes.

There is a pervasive sense of a crisis of legitimacy for the state. In many cases, this merely compounds an existing legitimacy deficit born of capture of the state by political and economic elites. In other cases it magnifies what is more the ineptitude of a state than its deliberate denial of popular aspirations. In yet others, the lack of meaningful response to global trends becomes the primary source of doubt about state legitimacy. On occasion there is a more or less rapid dissolution of ideologies or value systems that have tacitly guided and framed discourse in these societies. The combination of an ideological vacuum and a vacuum in political legitimacy opens space for the rapid advance of ideologies and rhetoric that may have little historical presence in a society. At times it allows ideologies that have historically appealed only to small minorities to expand their influence rapidly.

What distinguishes popular advocates from elites is the degree to which the former insist on placing the problem of the representativeness of the state at the center of the discussion. They draw attention to the extent to which even democratic states have stopped serving their own citizens, and have become instruments of elite interests from within the nation or outside. To some extent this is seen as reflecting the erosion of the integrity and vitality of previously established democratic procedures and practices. The concern about the representativeness of
political systems occurs particularly strongly in the context of Egypt and South Asia. Here too there is a difference of emphasis among societies. In Egypt and Pakistan, there is a demand for the establishment of authentic and reliable procedures of democratic practice. In India, there is a sense of established democratic norms eroding under the impact of both a power grab by economic and social elites and, ironically, the fissiparous effects of representation of a bewildering variety of politically awakening social groups.

Ambivalence about Outsiders

A part of the legitimacy crisis of the state stems from the sense of its capture by foreign interests such as governments, corporations, banks, multilateral lenders or donors. Concern about foreign interference takes different forms but recurs almost uniformly as a general issue. Opinion in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Singapore appears to meet economic globalization without flinching, yet in each there remains a strong sense of protectiveness and defensiveness against the prospect of having to accept more liberal global cultural or political values. The pushing of such values is perceived as Western blandishment and often also as bullying, self-righteous, and supercilious. Across the board such concerns are heard both from privileged elites and from radical critics of the status quo. It should be noted that this is not always an anti-cosmopolitan nationalist instinct. Critics of global economic integration are as ready as its proponents to contemplate and even welcome the model of a “post-Westphalian” international order, and contemplate overlapping sovereignties and various permutations of shared sovereignty between the state and meta-state institutions. What is questioned is the extent to which supra-national tools serve local interests. Transnational cooperation is seen as the inevitable consequence of the scale, scope, and complexity of the problems that affect citizens, which seem to exceed the intellectual and technical capacity of societies.

Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi anti-poverty campaigners expressed serious alarm at the extent to which their governments have been captive to a global consensus on economic policy (variously referred to as “neo-liberal,” “the IFIs,” or “the Washington Consensus”). This is associated with slashing of public resources devoted to providing social safety nets for the most vulnerable of their populations; redirection of public resources to infrastructure for the benefit of foreign investors rather than citizens; deregulation of economies to the detriment of consumers, workers, culture, and the environment; and inflation and other disruptions to economic life as a result of intolerably rapid integration into a global economy.

In the Middle East is heard concern about the political consequences to, and anger at, state elites caught in too close an embrace with Western strategic designs. This is sharpened by the perceived consequences of US policies on Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq. It also reflects resentment at the West’s perceived incomprehension of the causes of Arab anger, or of the warp and woof of local culture and values, and of the need to mediate the pace and the nature of change through those.
In Southeast Asia, political elites themselves adopt a distance from the purposes of the US and other outsiders. The reason for this distance is couched in terms of imposition of alien political values on societies that seek to maintain their indigenous Asian values. The relative ideological self-effacement of China is noted by these elites with contrasting appreciation. More activist and critical experts and thinkers focus on the roles of outsiders such as the multilateral development banks or large foreign corporations. These outsiders are seen as responsible for a pace and scale of development that critics see as environmentally unsustainable, and socially disruptive and inequitable. Where states are seen by them to be excessively close to those institutions or interests, their concerns about political legitimacy are heightened.

**Economic Inequality, Natural Environment, and Social Instability**

There is a widespread sense in all three regions that economic development has benefited only limited segments of these societies, and has left large segments further behind. Economic development seems also to have left untouched the foundations of endemic inequality, based on group membership or geography. These have been left to fester or intensify, perhaps even fueling new discontents based on rising expectations from observation of the “winners” of globalization. Widespread poverty remains a significant factor in most of these societies. And in many of them, integration into the global economy means more rapid inflation and erosion of the national government’s capacity to control economic trends to buffer its citizens from the deleterious consequences.

Huge numbers of the populations of these societies, in many nations the overwhelming majority, subsist on their local natural environments and depend on water tables, rivers, arable land, fish stocks, forests, and other natural resources. Consequently, concerns about the pace of exploitation of the natural environment and its impact on environmental quality are added to concerns about the inequities of economic development. Examples include the burning of forests in Indonesia to the detriment of air quality and public health in neighboring states, the damming or polluting of upstream waters in international river systems such as the Mekong, Ganges, and Tigris and Euphrates, and the impacts of overfishing by factory fleets on local fisheries and on marine environments.

Recent trends of exponential increase in natural resource exploitation are also seen as constituting threats to security as conventionally defined, because they give rise to conflict, or exacerbate existing sources of conflict. These are often armed conflicts among contending private actors, as in forest resource wars in India or Indonesia, or between local groups and the state. Campaigners for environmental protection or poverty alleviation often note the swift metamorphosis of those grievances into conflict, resistance, and insurgency. Experts on insurgency will note how often it is substantially, if not predominantly, based on grievances about the economic inequities, governance failures, identity-based discrimination, and environmental impacts arising out of natural resource use.
Threats to Law and Order

Ideology is generally considered but one element of a complex of factors accounting for the origins and continuing appeal of insurgency. Others include governance failures, economic inequality, historical patterns of discrimination and disenfranchisement, suppression of group identity, and a close relationship between disfavored identity and disfavored religion. Experts from throughout Southeast Asia are convinced that the Muslim rebellions in southern Thailand, Indonesian Aceh, and the southern Philippines are more about local control of resources and political power than about religious ideology. Islam here is a source of unifying identity rather than ideology. In this respect, these Islamic insurgencies are seen as closer to other insurgencies based on class or group identity, such as those in Pakistani Balochistan and northeast India, or Naxalite peasant and tribal rebellions throughout the Indian interior.

Although there is often loose talk—in the regions as well as in the US—in which terrorism and insurgency are spoken of as interchangeable and indistinguishable, there is also substantial concern in the regions about this conflation of terms. Covert transnational networks for violent attacks on civilians are often distinguished from the uses of violence by insurgent movements occupying territory and seeking to resist perceived economic injustice or ethnic discrimination. The means used by each of these, their organizational structures, and their operating environments are seen as distinct. Terrorist groups are seen as wanting to weaken the state, whereas the fundamental purpose of insurgencies is seen as negotiation with the state for the accomplishment of political ends.

Religion and Ideology

As important as Islam is, so are secular ideologies, and movements of non-Muslim religious ideological renewal and political mobilization. Among religious ideologies, one is most forcefully reminded of radical Hindu mobilization in India and mobilization among Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant evangelical, in the Philippines and Indonesia. Among the secular ideologies are variants of Maoist ideology, which are particularly significant in India, Nepal, and the Philippines. One is also frequently reminded, by comments such as “the United States is the most ideological nation in the world,” that perceptions in the regions are that neo-liberal economics and missionary zeal for promotion of democracy are contested ideological ground. Secular anti-capitalism and secular anti-Westernism also retain substantial force, particularly in India and generally in non-Muslim South and Southeast Asia. In the Muslim world, though important as a minor theme in countries such as Bangladesh or Pakistan, they are eclipsed by the Islamic formulation of anti-capitalist or anti-Western sentiments.

That said, Islam is the most significant intellectual locus of ideological contestation, for non-Muslims and Muslims alike. Yet there is also significant ambivalence about its being so. Many observers, Muslim and non-Muslim, note that the use of
Islam by the West as the framework for understanding developments in the three regions has both obscured an accurate understanding of the substantive causes of political mobilization, alienation, and resistance, and has privileged Islam as a source of identity. Islam has thereby acquired cachet as a symbol of resistance to the US, and to globalizing cultural and economic trends seen to come from the West.

The impulse to move the focus of the discussion away from Islam per se to a more social and political analysis is seen in discussions about Islamist political parties. The weight of opinion is that they should be understood as political parties contending for public support, and subject to the political calculations and constraints of all political parties, rather than as religious zealots in pursuit of a single-minded agenda.

THE REGIONS: BEYOND CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

The Middle East

What is most notable in the Middle East is the vast difference—almost distinct paradigms—between the hierarchy of policy issues as defined by experts and thinkers from the region and those which constitute the principal concerns of US policy makers. More than one of our interlocutors described the latter as “terrorism, extremism, and Islam.” Whereas the security and political implications of Islamic mobilization are a source of high concern to the US, the experts from the region locate Islamic mobilization as a subordinate element of a larger concern with problematical governance and a cultural, intellectual, and ideological vacuum demanding to be filled.

The dominant anxieties and priorities expressed by our interlocutors, or found in our research in the Middle East, are globalization, modernization, reform, demographic trends, workforce development and employment generation, and science and technology.

In short, the hierarchy of concerns in the Arab world is remarkably like that in any other region of the world, and grapples with the challenges of modernization and participation in the “brave new world” of the twenty-first century, rather than being narrowly focused on the question of identity or oppositional politics, let alone a backward-looking sense of identity. Where oppositional politics is present it is opposed to the failure of local states to meet these larger concerns about modernization, and opposed to a perceived Western complicity with those state elites.

Above all, there is in the region a dynamic sense of belonging to a larger world, contrary to the misperception that it has an autarchic focus and that it relates to the wider world largely on the basis of a sense of grievance, whether about Palestine or about the West’s perceived anti-Islamism. There is rather a sense of being palpably connected in trade, investment, technology, and migration, as much with South and East Asia, with Russia and Latin America, as with the United States and
Europe. This is the case as much in the Levant and the “old” Middle East as in the dynamic Gulf.

The US failure to understand political Islam particularly and the region more generally is seen as both the cause and the result of US pusillanimity about democracy in the Arab and Muslim world. The overblown alarm at the implications of political Islam and the timid embrace of unrepresentative and unresponsive governments are at the heart of anti-American feeling. The US is seen to fail to understand with sufficient clarity the crisis of the state in the Arab world.

A substantial amount of attention is devoted in the region to the question of intellectual and ideological renewal in the Arab world. There is a sense that at this historical juncture Islam is the overwhelmingly dominant paradigm for all political and social discourse. Even secularists despair that the secular Arab intellectual traditions are weak if not bankrupt. There appear to be dim prospects for secular counternarratives to political Islam.

What could be the basis for the next Arab renaissance? On this question Islamists appear to have grabbed the initiative following disappointment at US policy after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Some believe that the Islamist ascendency masks its own weakness: that Islamists have once again benefited by default from the shortcomings of their rivals rather than inherent strengths or appeal to mass opinion, and that ideological space remains open for alternatives. Science and technology, as well as offering tools for addressing emerging economic needs and technical challenges, also offers an implicit worldview, a rationalist and empirical dimension to culture and ideology, and is therefore discussed as part of the Arab intellectual awakening.

Our inquiry reminds us to not make the mistake of overstating either the optimistic prospects of the Gulf or the dismal prospects of the Levant. The latter is seen to possess substantial intellectual capital. Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese scientists, scholars, and intellectuals remain active and highly influential in the collective intellectual life of the region, through *inter alia* networks of scientific and technical cooperation and of learned societies. Despite their difficulties with state repression and inequitable distribution of the benefits of economic development, the growing economies in the Levant and Egypt suggest the presence of latent sources of dynamism and human resources.

By the same token, questions are asked about the sustainability of the Gulf economic miracle, because of limited human resources to sustain it, the limits posed by the natural environment, and the possibility of war and related instability in the region. The Gulf is ostensibly able to meet its requirements out of its capital surplus, and thus able to import whatever technical and human resources it needs to keep growing. The counter-narrative cautions against such unalloyed optimism. It has been suggested that the Gulf’s model of economic development is in fact
largely capital-led and marked by jobless growth, which indicates that labor shortages are not as significant as assumed.

With educational improvements for local populations there is now in fact greater competition between expatriate labor and qualified local labor, which adds to the social tensions from indigenous concerns about erosion of local identity and cultural heritage in the face of large non-Arab and non-Gulf Arab migrant worker populations. Concerns are also expressed about the security implications of large expatriate populations, particularly South Asian Muslims who may transmit militant ideologies from or to their own societies.

Caution is also expressed about the ability of Gulf governments to deliver on raised expectations about rising standards of living and economic opportunities. If a global economic downturn or a local economic adjustment were to disappoint these, there could be new issues about political accountability that elites in the Gulf would have to contend with.

The Gulf’s reliance on import of public administration and private management capacity is also seen as a source of vulnerability and uncertainty. Official policies to encourage recruitment of qualified local managerial or technical workers seem to be undercut by the growing importance of private capital relative to the state, and by the fact that the workforce decisions of multinational enterprises reflect global compulsions and policies rather than national policy.

Expectations that Gulf societies can rely on their considerable capital resources to deal with the consequences of rapid increases in population and standard of living are also challenged by environmental limits. Given capital surplus, technical capacities such as water desalination and regional planning can be procured as necessary; and expansion of physical infrastructure required by the pace of economic and demographic development is financially feasible. In discussions focused on the scientific and technical challenges of addressing environmental protection, climate change, water quality and infrastructure, public health, and similar issues, the development solutions are seen as sources of additional stress on a fragile environment. For example, reliance on desalination of water requires substantial energy, which in turn raises concerns about increased carbon emissions.

**South Asia**

Our inquiry in South Asia also reveals a wide divergence between US perceptions and those of experts from the region. The latter challenge both the dominant US and Western narrative of India rising to take its role in a global economy of prosperity, and the notion that the principal source of political instability and security concern in Pakistan and the region is Islamic radicalization.

The overall aspiration toward “Western” standards of living by any significant portions of the populations of South Asia is also seen as being economically and
environmentally unsustainable. There is deep skepticism about whether the cosmopolitan material standards of living seen in media and advertising, or modeled by elites, can be extended to any significant portion of the populations even at very high rates of economic growth, given very low starting points for economic growth and the extremely uneven distribution of benefits of growth arising from the chosen models of economic development. Given the population sizes in the region, there is substantial skepticism about the environmental sustainability of efforts to meet the aspirations of a billion and a half people to Western standards of living within the relatively circumscribed geographic and ecological conditions of the region.

What seems salient to experts from the region is intensification of the already high degree of resource scarcity, a sense that the already burdensome effects on human prosperity and natural environment of population growth will intensify, and that the key to understanding South Asia’s prospects of instability and violence is poverty and uneven economic development. There is a high degree of skepticism about the framing of political and security discourse in terms of terrorism and counterterrorism. The question frequently posed is why terrorism has gained so much currency in US discourse on security and politics, whereas poverty has not.

The capacity or will of states to manage rapid processes of change is in question, as is control of powerful transnational influences, corporate or criminal. A related and equally worrying concern is found in the presence of pervasive corruption in all South Asian societies and the increasing influence of criminals in politics. There is frank acknowledgment of the insufficiency of judicial, law enforcement, prosecutorial, or intelligence institutions to respond to the new threats to public order arising from either the internal discontents spawned by rapid globalization and social change or the external threats brought by liberalization of financial transactions, travel, and trade.

Although there is some debate on the matter, the clear weight of opinion among our interlocutors locates the source of political instability and social conflict in growing disparities of wealth, marginalization of many groups, withdrawal of the state from social welfare and regulatory functions, and unwillingness of elites to accommodate peacefully articulated political demands. The source of these in turn is located in what are variously described as “The Washington Consensus,” “The Neo-Liberal Theology (or Dogma),” and the baneful role of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

The dominant picture is of two-tiered societies, divided between the few who, through ownership of capital assets or through education, are able to aspire to global standards of living, and the vast numbers mired in underdevelopment. This is seen most sharply in India, owing to the rapid rise of its internationally competitive economic sectors and its multinational corporations, but the trend is noted throughout the region, particularly in Pakistan, where economic growth and international investment have been relatively robust in recent years. This is seen as con-
tributing to the sense of alienation between the state and its citizens, and between elites and the rest. It is also seen as the source of substantial resentment capable of being expressed in social unrest or political mobilization, which sometimes takes ultra-traditional cultural and religious forms.

Thus, the “war on terror” and the use of terrorism as an organizing paradigm for security policy making are seen as distorting both US understanding of the region and policy making by local elites. There is concern that the paradigm affects the political postures of governments toward their own societies, encouraging them to adopt policies that harm human rights. The paradigm has also shaped the evolving ways in which people of these societies perceive their identities, whether Muslim or anti-Muslim. There is also a sense that, whereas governments of the region collaborate bilaterally with the US, they do not collaborate among themselves.

Armed challenges to the state are seen as arising more from the crisis of state legitimacy, which itself stems from its perceived identification with the rich; or from the struggle of the poor or marginalized against the economic consequences of global trends (Naxalite movements among peasants or tribal populations in India or the Nepalese Maoist movement); or from deep-rooted aspirations based on linguistic or ethnic identity (movements among Pakistani Baloch, Tamils in Sri Lanka, or various ethnic groups in the Indian northeast). It is noted that armed challenges based on Islamic ideology are but one minor strain in the region as a whole. These too (Waziristan or Swat in Pakistan) are explained in terms broader than mere religious ideology, as drawing also on resentments about economic marginalization by powerful outsiders or local elites, and related concerns about cultural identities undergoing intolerable stress and rapid evolution.

Indeed the role of ideology of all kinds is considered less significant than social and economic processes of destabilization. While many insurgencies are led by “Maoist” cadres, they are seen more as reflections of rural class conflict and the rebellion of marginalized peasants against a state seen as acting in the interests of the rural elites. It is noted that nominal Marxists are seen repressing peasant mobilizations against multinational capital in West Bengal.

It is suggested that the discourse between and about Islam and the West is a “sound-bite dialogue,” marked by epithets and simplistic formulae. The global penetration of this discourse is seen as affecting the perceptions and shaping of identity in South Asia. Concern is expressed that the excessive focus by the US on Islam and Muslim identity has privileged it even in the political discourse of the region, and has diminished other sources of identity. Pakistani Baloch express particular concern about the prejudicial effects of this on sub-national social and political movements not primarily based on religious identity, as the Pakistani state sweeps all under the rubric of terror and extremism. There is a pervasive sense, among Muslim South Asians as much as non-Muslims, that this is obscuring the fact that ethnicity and language historically have been as significant as religion in the construction of political identity.
The greatest awareness about climate change as a major transnational security issue is demonstrated by Indians and Bangladeshis. As citizens of a delta and coastal nation, Bangladeshis see issues of sea level rise and irregular river flows (flooding and shortages) as central to their well-being. Indian economic development enjoys short-term benefits from carbon emissions, and yet there is deep concern about the economic and human costs of the consequences of global warming in reduced food production, increased disease, and insufficient water supply.

There is also a sense, more among Indians than others, of the close relationship between the issues of climate change and energy security, owing to the overwhelming reliance of India’s rapid economic development on fossil fuels. There is widespread skepticism about the prospects of substantial reliance on renewable energy sources, despite the environmental imperative. Nuclear power and water power are discussed as the most viable alternatives to fossil fuels, but with a sense of concern about the long-term environmental and economic sustainability of either, and a sense of concern at the demographic, infrastructural, and social implications of population displacement and resettlement required by the building of dams.

Water is more widely discussed as a potential source of crisis in South Asia than it is in the Middle East. Several factors are seen to converge into a crisis: higher demand from rising living standards of urban middle-class populations, gross increases in population, increased demands from economic and industrial development, pollution of existing limited water supplies, falling water tables, intensification of traditional flooding problems as a result of environmental degradation of watersheds and melting of glaciers owing to climate change, and unpredictable rainfall patterns resulting from climate change. The disproportionate extent to which the agriculture and aquaculture of the region depend upon seasonal rainfall and upon river flows is seen as a significant source of vulnerability to crisis.

What is notable is the scant awareness about the sometimes dire transnational implications of actions taken in one country. Bangladesh, as the downstream nation in a major river system, and as the nation most vulnerable to a variety of natural and man-made disasters, offers an exception to this, as do the vulnerable island nations of Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Southeast Asia

Our inquiry in this region evinced a far greater awareness of the transnational dimension of emerging threats, and of regional institutions and initiatives, than in the other two. To some extent this reflects the fact that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprises all the countries of the region and, despite all the limitations arising from its principle of mutual noninterference, retains aspirations to be an effective multilateral body. The Gulf Cooperation Council
As an economic and diplomatic player in the region is so great as to merit substantial consideration across the board. Most Southeast Asians appear to be optimistic about the implications of China’s increasing presence in the region. Certainly, China’s relationship with Southeast Asian countries and intentions has improved in the past decade. There is some sense that China, by being less demanding and conditional in the way that it provides aid or investment, offers a useful counterweight to the US and to international financial institutions. There is greater criticism of China’s disregard of the environment and its highly exploitative approach to natural resources.

Experts in the region evince real ambivalence in their discussion of the US. There is an equally obvious, though contradictory, sense of resentment at both the hectoring and peremptory posture of the US in the region and its failure to play a sufficient role to balance the presence of China in the economic, political, and security affairs of the region.

Despite the sense of regional unity derived from membership in ASEAN, experts in the region nonetheless evince a sharp sense of internal inequality and divergence of historical experience and social character. The most obvious significant distinction noted is that between the older members of ASEAN, which was formed as a
bulwark against Communism, and the newer ones, most of which are in various states of economic transition but with controlled political systems under former Communist elites. Burma is of course seen as the laggard in the pack owing to its repressive and violent government and the severe economic underdevelopment suffered by most of its people.

At the same time, the economic integration of the region produces a palpable and transparent sense of the transnational character of its principal social, economic, and political challenges. Issues such as those arising from the regionwide exploitation of forest resources, or from the intensive exploitation of the Mekong River by most of the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, are seen as levelers. Given the candid admission that unsustainable exploitation and environmental degradation are rife in the “responsible” societies of the region, or perpetrated by their businesses in weaker neighbors, the practical distinctions seem marginal between societies such as Burma, Cambodia, or Laos on the one hand and Indonesia, Thailand, or the Philippines on the other.

The rising demand and opportunities for natural resource exploitation provided by global economic integration, along with the imperatives of governments to deliver rapid economic growth, are seen to have fueled the unsustainable exploitation of forests, minerals, fisheries, and increasingly scarce water resources. The over-exploitation of tropical forests also accelerates the effects of global warming by reducing carbon dioxide absorption, reducing precipitation, and lowering coastal water tables.

A number of experts express concern about the poor communication between technical experts and policy makers. Important studies have been conducted on all the principal environmental challenges spawned by economic development, but the information is not easily accessible or comprehensible to policy makers. For example, the environmental degradation caused by most methods of aquaculture is little understood, yet aquaculture accounts for a significant proportion of regional fisheries. While itself subject to political and bureaucratic complexity, the state is also seen to demand oversimplification of the technical understandings necessary to respond to many transnational threats. There is also observed a common tendency in various types of political systems to respond to short-term interests at the expense of long-term policy making.

Many people outside government regard the state itself as a significant threat to human security. There are concerns about the role of the state in facilitating penetration by large international economic units of natural environments relied on for local subsistence, as well as about abdication by the state of its historical responsibility to provide certain public services such as public health. Among the dimensions of this are political failure, corruption, lack of adequate law enforcement, lack of state capacity and resources, and bureaucratic dysfunction. The rapid pace of change characteristic of globalization is seen as straining the
capacities of states to adapt to new conditions those structures that were created to solve old problems.

Decentralization and democratization are often identified as adding to such problems. Tensions are seen between the paralysis of democratic government and the corrupt opacity of its opposite, and between the responsiveness to popular will of decentralization and the potential for capture by local elites or adoption of narrow local interests adverse to rational policy.

The capacity or will of states to address the salient transnational issues is also seen to be varied among the countries of the region. Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos often figure as examples of serious lack of state capacity, because of the legacy of war and because of the sclerotic character of their Communist or post-Communist political systems. Indonesia is considered to be weakening in terms of capacity as a result of transition to democracy and the weakening of central government, owing in part to a deliberate commitment to decentralization of power. Other countries such as Singapore or Malaysia are seen as capable yet limited to defensive responses against threats and challenges emanating from without their borders.

That said, the Southeast Asian region is distinguished by its relatively advanced state of international cooperation on issues such as readiness for response to natural disasters or pandemic diseases. On matters of response to pandemic or environmental threats, there is a palpable sense among important bodies of expert opinion that the region is treated by the global community as “the canary in the coalmine;” that the global community expects the countries of the region to take measures as much for global purposes as for their own. This sometimes occasions a degree of resentment, particularly when the economic costs of prevention (for example through the culling of birds) appear to be punitive.

HEARING AND UNDERSTANDING THEIR VOICES

The papers that follow reflect a wide variety of opinion in the three regions on a wide variety of issues. They include inter alia the reflections of an Arab scientist on the principal challenges in the Middle East, a sympathetic Arab assessment of the popular political and ideological processes under way in the Arab world, reflections from the state and the non-state perspective on Southeast Asian issues relating to exploitation of natural resources such as forests and fisheries, and a defense of secular and plural politics by an Indian Muslim leader. While no collection of essays can do justice to the range and complexity of perspectives that we have been privileged to encounter in the course of our year-long inquiry, we believe that the essays collected here can and do convey the rich and important deliberations on nontraditional security issues among experts in
the regions, and the ways in which their views differ from Western and US assumptions or postulates.

The papers by experts from the regions are followed by analytical papers by Stimson scholars who have been active in the work of the *Regional Voices: Transnational Challenges* project through interviews with experts, attendance at colloquia, travel in the regions, and research into the literature. These essays seek to understand and interpret what we have heard, and to emphasize its importance to US policy discourse.