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Two years ago, the trajectory for the Arab Spring countries seemed straightforward. The world assumed that the transitions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya would eventually give birth to more pluralistic societies, that democracy would become institutionalised, and that economic prosperity would be enhanced. The road might have looked bumpy in the short term, but at least the destination was in view.

In light of the growing political instability since, many have started to question these assumptions, and both the regional outlook and individual national trajectories have become more uncertain. There is now a growing consensus that the region is facing a time of heightened uncertainty, at the root of which is societal polarisation.

The Survey on the Global Agenda supports this viewpoint, revealing that experts all over the world consider rising societal tensions in the Middle East and North Africa to be the biggest challenge facing the world in 2014. But the data also allows us to focus specifically on the region, helping us to understand how people feel on the ground. And there are some significant changes to note. 

There is a battle of ideas taking place within the Arab world, and it is polarising a region whose long-term outlook remains uncertain.
In the past, divergence in the Arab world ran mainly along economic lines, but in the post-Arab Spring era, additional drivers have emerged. Today, 45% of respondents say that the biggest challenge they face is political instability, while only 27% name unemployment as the region’s most pressing challenge.

Within this context different ideological viewpoints have come to the fore, often presenting starkly divergent paths for the future. Most visible is the split between those who want political Islam to play a role in public life, and others who want to keep religion and government separate. We also see a trend of rising sectarian tensions within communities, and fractured regional cooperation on certain key issues.

The lack of trust among competing parties, an atmosphere of intolerance in the public arena and, more generally, the failure to put inherently fragile transitions on a stable path, are all to blame for the increased tensions. With the international community cautious to engage, regional players with divergent perspectives are playing a larger role in shaping domestic outcomes in transitioning countries.

The Arab world has entered a period of rising tensions, in which the future could be as much about the defeat of hope for change, as about the potential for a revival taking place. Our path at the moment remains unclear, but we should not allow that to deter us.

The two most important regional challenges facing MENA are political instability and unemployment.

Inside the data

Percentage of people dissatisfied with the situation in their country

What is the greatest challenge facing your region?

How significant do different regions consider rising societal tensions in the Middle East and North Africa?

Source: Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Project 2013, pewglobal.org

Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2013