

2012: A Year in Review

While the world did not end in 2012 as the ancient Mayan calendar predicted, it was a year of uncertainty and instability in the Middle East. The initial enthusiasm for the Arab revolts gave way to hard realism about their outcomes, as political instability and horrific violence continued to plague much of the region. Meanwhile, Israel watched with concern as radical Islamists rose to positions of power and militant jihadi groups proliferated across the area.

In Syria, President Bashar Assad's forces committed untold atrocities this year in an effort to crush the uprising against his regime. Warplanes, artillery and tanks bombarded civilian areas, reducing entire neighborhoods to rubble and leaving more than 30,000 people dead since the uprising began.

Beyond the staggering human cost to Syria itself, the ongoing conflict sent shockwaves across the Middle East. Hundreds of thousands fled Syria to neighboring countries, straining their limited resources and raising fears of unrest. At the same time, Islamic extremists entered the country in growing numbers. These jihadists have made clear their intent to eventually branch out and attack Israel once they are done fighting the Assad regime.

The violence in Syria also spread next door to Lebanon this year. Clashes between local allies and opponents of the Syrian regime left dozens dead, and tensions among Lebanon's numerous religious and ethnic groups threatened to plunge the country back into civil war.

In Jordan, King Abdullah struggled to cope with the growing influx of Syrian refugees, exacerbating existing economic woes. Rising discontent over the economic situation and stalled political reforms endangered the stability of Jordan, a stalwart American ally.

Egypt saw the ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood this year. Though the country's Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi, has pledged to respect all of Egypt's international agreements, other Brotherhood leaders have made troublesome statements regarding the peace treaty with Israel. No less worrisome is the situation in the Sinai Peninsula, which militants turned into a conduit for arms smuggling and a base for attacks on both Egyptians and Israelis.

On top of these issues is the perennial problem of Iran's belligerence and its rapidly advancing nuclear problem. Despite international pressure and increasingly tough sanctions, the number of Iranian centrifuges producing enriched uranium continued to grow over the past 12 months.

The turmoil that swept the Middle East in 2012 presents unprecedented challenges to both the United States and Israel. But a strong relationship between these allies should allow them to handle the troubles that undoubtedly lie ahead, and emerge stronger and equally committed to their shared values.