



MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL
ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

DOSSIER
NOVEMBER 2023

THE MIDDLE EAST'S FRAGILE RESET ACTORS, BATTLEFIELDS, AND (DIS)ORDER

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INTRODUCTION

Galip Dalay & Tarik M. Yousef

The question of (dis)order remains central to current debates on Middle Eastern politics and security. It is a multifaceted question with security, political, and economic dimensions and is intimately interlinked with the Middle East's place in the changing global system and external powers' relations with the region.

The domestic, regional, and external contexts of this question have dramatically changed over the last decade. Although the Arab uprisings have subsided, the social, political, and economic grievances that led to the political upheaval from 2011 to 2019 remain unaddressed, if not worsened. From the post-Arab Spring economic dislocation to the COVID-19 pandemic recessions and, more recently, to the cost-of-living crisis following the war in Ukraine, socio-economic indicators outside the Arab Gulf have moved in reverse. A resurgence in military rule has interrupted political transitions and autocrats in power have tightened their grip on state institutions and public life. As a result, the region continues to underperform on metrics of corruption, transparency, and good governance.

Despite this static domestic picture, the regional and international contexts of Middle Eastern politics have experienced major changes. Specifically, the nature of intra-bloc dynamics and inter-bloc competition has undergone a major transformation. Indeed, setting aside the phase of the fierce geopolitical and ideological contests of the previous decades, regional diplomacy was experiencing an upswing until recently. Prior to the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, ensuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Israel's siege and invasion of Gaza, almost all regional countries were active participants in the ongoing process of regional de-escalation and normalization signaled by the Abraham Accords, the resolution of the intra-Gulf rift, the thaw in Türkiye's relations with the Arab Gulf states, the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the gradual re-integration of Syria into the regional system. Additionally, several regional and international actors, such as Iraq, Iran, and Russia, have offered their visions for some form of a regional order or security dialogue.

These different normalization initiatives encompassed almost all regional states. An exception has been the absence of de-escalation between Iran and Israel. Despite this, there is a significant difference between how the Arab-Gulf states and Israel want to deal with Iran. The Abraham Accords were decidedly anti-Iran. Likewise, the discontent with Iran's regional policy was an implicit factor in Türkiye's normalization with the Arab-Gulf states and Israel. However, the thaw in Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and even precariously with Egypt have changed this picture, with Iran increasingly becoming an active participant in the realignment dynamics. In short, de-escalation, reset, and normalization were the fashionable vocabularies to describe this phase of regional politics then. The emerging regional language was less ideological, less geopolitical, and more economic. Regional conflicts were losing steam, albeit far from being resolved.

At the international level, the Middle East is still far from breaking with its old alliances. However, the perception that the United States (U.S.) is less engaged with and less committed to the region is widely prevalent among the regional political class. This perception, or reality, is one of the major factors defining how regional powers are approaching each other and external actors. It informs the region-wide trend of normalization between former regional antagonists and multipolarity in terms of the region's relations with external powers.

China is fast increasing its share in the regional economy, and Russia in regional security. To reflect this, China is already the largest trade partner of the region and rapidly expanding its footprint in the region's sensitive technological front and strategic infrastructure projects—new frontlines of great power competition. Plus, as China's recent mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has shown, it is increasingly cultivating new roles for itself in the diplomatic, mediation-facilitation, post-conflict stabilization, and reconstruction fields. However, it is yet to define its place in regional security. Likewise, to the chagrin of the West, on the war in Ukraine, Middle Eastern actors have largely adopted a neutral policy. This neutrality is mainly an outcome of two interrelated factors—the regional actors' discontent with U.S. policy, including its unreliable and unpredictable nature, and Russia's growing role in regional security as shown through its presence in conflict zones such as in Syria and Libya.

Against this backdrop of deepening domestic grievances, regional normalization, and growing multipolarity in terms of the Middle East's relations with international powers, the Middle East Council on Global Affairs launched a two-year-long project entitled "The Future of the Middle Eastern (Dis)order." By its conclusion, the project will have produced a number of publications and convened three workshops, bringing together experts, current and former policymakers, and representatives of relevant regional and international institutions.

The first workshop examined different aspects, manifestations, and contestations of the regional (dis)order, along with the significance, drivers, and implications of the ongoing regional reset. It also studied the dynamics behind escalation, de-escalation, and normalization in Middle Eastern politics, including their impacts on the regional conflict zones, and the theme of multipolarity in the region's relations with international powers.

The second and third workshops will be more geographically focused. They will concentrate on the question of security and order in the Gulf and the Mediterranean. These two subregions have become microcosms of the contests over the regional order in the Middle East at large.

Each stream of this project aims to produce a special dossier on the subject. This first dossier focuses on how the regional order and the nature of regional alliances are evolving, how the current process of regional reset and multipolarity have informed the policy recalibrations of Middle Eastern and international powers, and how these two processes affect regional conflict and crisis zones. More specifically, this dossier first delves into the question of regional order, the nexus between regional alliances and order, the new regional energy order, and the future of Abraham Accords. It then looks at the evolving regional policies of Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Iran, and small Gulf states, not least the UAE. It also examines the shifting roles of the U.S., China, Russia, and European Union in the Middle East. Finally, this dossier studies the impact of the regional reset, multipolarity, and great power competition on regional battlegrounds in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

However, a caveat needs to be stressed. This dossier was completed before the eruption of the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel's invasion of Gaza. This war represents a watershed moment in regional affairs. It affects the process and dynamics of the regional re-



set, in particular the normalization of ties between Israel and regional states. To reflect this, Omar H. Rahman and Raffaella A. Del Sarto partially updated their chapters since they dealt directly with the Abraham Accords and the question of regional order. However, while the war in Gaza will certainly reshape the regional politics and policies of all main regional and international actors, the content, main themes, and arguments of all other chapters remain as valid and relevant. This project will nevertheless focus on how this war redefines regional politics and the question of regional (dis)order in its upcoming work in a more detailed manner.

SECTION ONE
REGIONAL (DIS)ORDER



Asaad bin Tariq al-Said, Omani Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and the Special Representative of the Sultan; UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan; Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi; Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa; US President Joe Biden; Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman; Jordan's King Abdullah II; Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani; Kuwait's Crown Prince Meshal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah; and Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhemi pose together for the family photo during the "GCC+3" (Gulf Cooperation Council) meeting at a hotel in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia July 16, 2022. Mandel Ngan/Pool via REUTERS





A REGION IN TRANSITION: THE FLUID NATURE OF MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

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Many thanks to Daniel Lubin, Galip Dalay, and Nejla Ben Mimoune for their valuable feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the regional order in the Middle East in recent years. Ever since the Arab uprisings started in 2010–2011, debates on whether regional politics changed fundamentally, and perhaps even irreversibly, have abounded.¹ Certainly, the region has witnessed significant developments since 2011. Revolutions have ousted long-term autocrats, civil wars involving multiple armed groups erupted, and the antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran reverberated throughout the region. Several regional actors, most notably Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, upped their game in Middle Eastern politics, as did Russia and China, while the United States (U.S.) somewhat retreated from the region. Amid this turmoil, surviving regimes, increasingly obsessed with staying in power, manipulated sectarian divides and strengthened the authoritarian hold over their citizens. But how radical and qualitatively new are these developments? Are we witnessing the emergence of a fundamentally new regional order in the Middle East? And are the latest military confrontations between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas, that started after Hamas overran a swath of southern Israel on October 7, killing roughly 1,400 people and taking over 200 hostages,² likely to be a turning point in regional politics?

CONCEIVING REGIONAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The answer to these questions largely depends on how the very notion of regional order is defined and which events are deemed to have triggered far-reaching changes in regional politics.³ Hence, a few reflections on regional order are, well, in order.

While regional order should not be conflated with “orderly” relations,⁴ one way to conceive of regional order focuses on the distribution of power and material capabilities. Analysis may also consider the “ordering” role of external actors (usually the U.S.) as the main criterion for assessing change,⁵ thereby implying that the Middle East has no natural order by itself: it must be ordered from the outside. However, a far more analytical conception is possible. In addition to the distribution of material and ideational power, norms and practices underpinning politics must be taken into account, together with institutions. Examples include the norms of state sovereignty and non-interference, but also pan-Arabism, anti-colonialism, and anti-Zionism, which have structured Middle East politics in the past.⁶ Such norms and institutions create solid expectations of legitimate behavior of the main actors in the system and link their policies to each other. With the nature of security relations within a region remaining central, this notion of regional order is also sensitive to region-wide securitization dynamics, that is, processes by which specific subjects become security issues.⁷

Anchored in the traditions of the English school and constructivism in international relations, this multifaceted approach to regional order leads to rather nuanced assessments of developments in the Middle East in the last decade. States have remained the main actors in the system, and the norms of sovereignty, territoriality, and the monopoly over the use of force—norms that define the international system writ large—are still central. Similarly, the prevalent domestic features of the region’s main actors, namely authoritarianism, militarism, and state crony capitalism, have remained largely unchanged. And while region-wide security relations are still predominantly conflictual, the level of regional cooperation has remained

low, the degree of foreign meddling has remained high, and the Middle East continues to be a multipolar system. These norms and practices lend legitimacy to state behavior and connect the policies of the Middle East's main actors to each other. In other words, a series of key ordering elements of the region have remained unchanged, notwithstanding repeated challenges and contestation.

A REGION IN TRANSITION

It was the disastrous U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 that set several developments with long-lasting implications for the region in motion.⁸ These include increased fragmentation, the rise of sectarianism, the multiplication and mounting strength of armed non-state actors that culminated in the rise of the self-declared Islamic State, and Iran's growing involvement in regional affairs. Since the 2011 uprisings, however, the region has found itself in a critical phase of transition, an *interregnum*, to use Gramsci's term,⁹ in which "morbid phenomena" have appeared, as argued elsewhere.¹⁰

Rapidly shifting patterns of alliance formation are such a symptom. The Arab uprisings and their aftermath profoundly shook the region, fomenting a strong sense of insecurity among many regional actors. The U.S.'s growing disinterest in the region—or the perception thereof—and the involvement of a high number of both regional and external players in Middle East security dynamics—including Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran, the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—further nurtured the preoccupation with regime security and political survival.¹¹ But these developments also provided regional powers seeking support with greater room for maneuver. As a result, states and non-state actors alike have been entering ever-shifting alliances pertaining to different conflicts and fault lines in the region. Unlike the changing alignments that marked Arab politics during much of the 1950s and 1960s,¹² shifts now occur at a far greater pace and intensity. A real novelty is that allies on one issue may simultaneously be on opposite sides on another. The civil wars in Syria and Libya provide a plethora of examples here, with major natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean adding another issue-specific layer in reshuffling the regional relations.⁵ Alliances have become "liquid," as Soler i Lecha has put it,¹⁴ rendering the question of which actors are friends in the Middle East, and which are foes, increasingly confusing.

THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

This backdrop set the stage for the normalization deals between Israel and several Arab states in 2020, dubbed the "Abraham Accords." The U.S.-orchestrated agreements that Israel signed with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan started as a pure security and business transaction, revolving mainly around U.S. weapons and "favors" as well as (Israeli) surveillance technology.¹⁵ While significantly strengthening Israel's strategic position, the prospect of jointly confronting Iran was a key motivation for the two Gulf monarchies to normalize relations with Israel. Particularly the cooperation between the UAE and Israel expanded to cover trade relations, tourism, and investments in the high-tech, energy, and environment sectors.¹⁶ And by also involving the U.S. as well as Egypt, which already signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, the recently established "Negev Forum"¹⁷ for regional cooperation indicated that the "Abraham Accords" may well have led to the emergence of a new regional security architecture.

The normalization agreements were not only the formalization of preexisting secret dealings between Israel and most of the accords' signatories, but they also evidenced the ever-declining relevance of anti-Zionism and pan-Arabism as shared norms of legitimate Arab state behavior, a development that had started decades earlier. In fact, non-Arab states (Iran and Türkiye) and non-state actors (Hezbollah and Hamas) emerged as the major supporters of the Palestinian cause. As the Arab-Israeli divide has been a key structuring element of the Middle East regional order for the last seventy years at least, no matter the contradictions in Arab state behavior in practice,¹⁸ the "Abraham Accords" had the potential to fundamentally alter the Middle East regional order. This would have been even more noteworthy if a series of negotiations between the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Israel had led to a Saudi-Israeli normalization deal.¹⁹ Israel's massive military operations in the besieged Gaza Strip in retaliation of the Hamas attacks of October 7 that had already killed thousands of Palestinian civilians at the time of writing,²⁰ have put any normalization talks on hold.

Other rapprochements between former adversaries reflect the "liquid" alliance pattern in the Middle East. Examples include the end of the three-and-a-half-year blockade on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain in January 2021, the restoration of full diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Israel in August 2022, the China-brokered restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia of March of this year, and the readmission of the Syrian regime into the Arab League in May 2023. Until recently, the reconciliation between Riyadh and Tehran has had the potential to change the Middle East regional order as much as the "Abraham Accords." This is because the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and their shared habit of inflaming the Sunni-Shia divide for political ends, significantly structured regional relations since the 2003 fall of Iraq's Saddam Hussein at least.²¹ The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement may put an end to Yemen's catastrophic civil war,²² reduce the proxy rivalry that has been playing out across the Middle East and affected the situation in Syria, Lebanon, and beyond, and lead to the de-securitization of sectarian divides.

THE LOSERS

In this uncertain period of transition, characterized by the kaleidoscopic composition and re-composition of alliances, self-interested opportunism, and a conspicuous deficit of ethical or ideological standards on the part of the region's leaders, there have been two main losers. The first are, undoubtedly, the Palestinians. Theoretically, the so-called Abraham Accords could have acted as a vector for the renewal of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. But de facto, the agreements decoupled the normalization of ties with Israel from the unresolved Palestinian question, thereby contradicting the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. Yet, 2022 was the deadliest year for West Bank Palestinians in seven years, and Palestinian attacks on Israelis were on the rise, too.²³ Even prior to the eruption of the Israel-Hamas war on October 7, the year 2023 had already seen a massive increase in violence, including an ever-growing number of Israeli settler attacks on Palestinians and their properties, with the current Israeli government approving new constructions in West Bank settlements on an unprecedented scale.²⁴ Arab rulers may no longer have felt obliged to commit to the Palestinian cause, but the continuous denial of basic rights and dignity to the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation has not lost its relevance for Arab populations. While Hamas' attacks on Israel and the ensuing war have put the unresolved Palestinian issue back on the political map, the popular

outrage across the Middle East at the killing of thousands of Palestinian civilians and the widespread, wrecked destruction by Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip is putting serious pressure on Arab regimes.

Sure, the Arab "Abraham Accords" signatories, and Saudi Arabia in the future, may be demanding some kind of agreement with the Palestinians in return for continuing the normalization trend. However, in that case, Israel's far-right government, which includes some pyromaniacal ministers, would not be able to have its cake and eat it, too: the governing coalition's extremist right categorically rejected any meaningful concession towards the Palestinians even before Hamas' massacre of Israeli civilians on October 7. The willingness of any future Israeli government to accept the establishment of an independent Palestinian state right next to it will be close to zero unless it is part of a comprehensive political solution with substantive international pressure and involvement.

Political accountability and human rights are the second biggest losers. The normalization deals occurred in a general context of authoritarian entrenchment in the Middle East, thereby providing legitimacy to non-accountable regimes with despicable human rights records. Supplying weapons and sophisticated surveillance technology to these regimes will not render them less autocratic. In Western capitals, the turmoil caused by the Arab uprisings and the ensuing civil wars, which also prompted waves of refugees and migrants reaching Europe, has strengthened a resounding preoccupation with the region's stability. The U.S. has of course a long history of supporting oppressive regimes that do not challenge Washington's worldview and hegemonic ambitions, even more so if they export oil and buy American weapons in turn. Europe has similarly pampered the region's dictators for decades. And with Europe particularly affected by price spikes following sanctions imposed on Russian energy exports after the 2023 invasion of Ukraine, the Europeans are far more interested in securing alternative hydrocarbon supplies in the Middle East and North Africa than addressing human rights abuses. Unsurprisingly, the two new external players in the Middle East, Russia, and China, are not promoting any agenda of political reforms either. And in the current confrontations between Israel and Hamas, human rights and international law are once again at loss, with the international community divided over which side has been committing greater and/or "justifiable" atrocities.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the Middle East finds itself in a precarious transition period in which several long-standing principles that structured regional relations are seriously challenged. Both the recent Saudi-Iranian reconciliation and the "Abraham Accords"—should they survive the current Israel-Hamas war—could fundamentally transform the regional order. The same can be said of the unprecedentedly violent confrontations between Israel and Hamas that could escalate into a broader regional conflict. During this period of transition, the prevailing patterns of regional politics also show that regional actors, including traditional U.S. allies, have acquired far greater autonomy in pursuing their often narrowly defined interests, choosing their partners accordingly, and changing their minds as they please. However, the region has also remained state centric. Entrenched authoritarianism and militarism project strength and stability but often masquerade the weak political

legitimacy of incumbent regimes. Türkiye, Tunisia, and Israel have also turned increasingly illiberal. The dire impact of climate change, stark inequalities both within countries and across the region, and soaring food and energy prices that further worsen the already dire economic situation of the region's poorer states additionally threaten the region's chimeric stability. With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back to center stage, it remains to be seen whether all these developments will lead to the emergence of a fundamentally new regional order.

ENDNOTES

1. The extensive literature cannot all be cited here, but see for example Bassel Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," *International Spectator* 48, no. 2 (2013): 32–46, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/salloukh.pdf>; Galip Dalay, "Break-up of the Middle East: Will we see a new regional order?," *Middle East Eye*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/65572>; Marc Lynch, "The New Arab Order," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (2018): 116–126, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-08-14/new-arab-order>.
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3. Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig, and Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Lost in Change: A Framework for Understanding Change in the Middle East Regional Order," in *Region-Making and Power in the Middle East*, eds. Marc Lynch and Simon Mabon, forthcoming.
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15. Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Charles Lawrie, "Olive Branch or Fig Leaf? What Israel's Normalisation Processes Really Mean for Regional Security," *LSE Middle East Centre Blog* (blog), November 13, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/11/13/olive-branch-or-fig-leaf-what-israels-normalisation-processes-really-mean-for-regional-security/>. Morocco obtained Washington's blessing for its illegal rule over the Western Sahara and Sudan was removed from the U.S. list of terrorism-sponsoring states in turn.
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17. See "Negev Forum Steering Committee Joint Statement," U.S. Department of State, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/negev-forum-steering-committee-joint-statement/>. Jordan, which also has peace treaty with Israel since 1994, did not participate, mainly because the Palestinians did not take part.
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LOCALLY-LED REGIONAL ALLIANCES AND THE FUTURE OF MIDDLE EASTERN SECURITY: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF NOVEL SECURITY FRAMEWORKS

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INTRODUCTION

Any discussion on how the changing nature of regional alliances is impacting the future regional order in the Middle East must take note of the proliferation of novel security frameworks that have in recent years increased in importance across the region. These informal security coalitions, also on the rise in Africa over the same period,¹ have been given many titles: multinational security coalitions, ad-hoc security coalitions, limited quasi-alliances, liquid or virtual alliances, and tacit security regimes. Some recent Middle Eastern examples include the Yemen War Coalition, launched in March 2015 by Saudi Arabia and its co-leader, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to use military force to reinstate the government of Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi and to neutralize the threat of the non-state group Ansar Allah, also known as Houthis; the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), established in December 2015 under Saudi leadership, with the declared objective of coordinating and supporting military operations in the fight against terror and non-state violent actors across the Islamic world;² and the evolving Israel-UAE-Bahrain security nexus, which in its initial iteration evolved in response to the Iranian threat.³ If one is willing to forego an explicit security component, it is also possible to include, as other examples of this phenomenon, new maritime and energy coalitions such as the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), and even the Saudi-UAE-led coalition that embargoed Qatar between 2017–2021.⁴

In addition to the diversity in coalition members, in terms of their institutional design, these coalitions are informal configurations of highly flexible temporary cooperation. Their focus, as noted above, is on a specific threat, security challenge or mission. In contrast to traditional alliances, which are built on long-term political alignments and international cooperation, the *raison d'être* of informal ad-hoc coalitions is almost exclusively issue-specific. The flexible, improvised nature of such alliances, which avoids precedent-setting footprints, affects the management of operational tasks as well as the levels and nature of cooperation between members. Overcoming one of the major constraints of formal “inside-out” alliances like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), informal coalitions do not have strict admission criteria like those that prevented the expansion of the GCC beyond its six founding members. As Adel Al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabia’s then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, explained at the time of the IMCTC launch, individual partners could decide “what to contribute, and when to contribute it, and in what form and shape they would like to make that contribution.”⁵ Furthermore, contributors to informal coalitions usually agree to join without any resort to formal arrangements such as treaties or institutions and these coalitions can be easily disbanded. In other words, a long-term enduring institutional relationship is not their goal.

This type of informal coalition is not new on the global stage. The U.S.-led coalition to remove Iraq from Kuwait in 1991 was an early post-Cold War example of this kind of security cooperation in action. A more recent U.S.-led example is the Global Coalition against Daesh (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS), established in 2014.⁶ What makes the current iteration of these coalitions in the Middle East novel is that, unlike the U.S.-led coalition in response to the invasion of Kuwait in 1990–91 or the anti-ISIS coalitions, they all represent a shift away from reliance on a powerful outsider at the center. Unfolding events since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq have significantly eroded Arab confidence in Washington’s role as the main long-term

security provider for the region. Local actors are therefore in search of alternative security structures. This has resulted in the rise of informal coalitions led by active regional states looking to become suppliers rather than buyers of security. These actors are often considered to be middle powers; some even have significant resources to realize their goals and defend their interests in a regional context.

These coalitions are a function of the rising ambitions and confidence of local leaders as well as their growing dissatisfaction with the regional security status quo, especially regarding the perceived shortcomings of existing institutions in meeting their security needs and objectives. In the Gulf context, this primarily refers to a growing belief, since the Arab Spring, in the ineffectiveness of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a security mechanism.⁷ Despite its far from perfect record as an actor in peace and security, prior to the blockade of Qatar in 2017 the GCC had earned its reputation as the 'first meaningful semblance' and 'most successful example' of a regional security institution in the Middle East.⁸ On numerous occasions, prior to the major intra-GCC crisis of the blockade on Qatar, member states engaged in mediation and/or multiparty negotiations inside the GCC to address internal disputes: in 1990, when Bahrain and Qatar came close to a military exchange over competing claims to contested islands in the waters that separate the two small kingdoms; in the early 2000s, when GCC harmony was threatened by long-running tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over ownership of the Zararah oilfield on their shared border; in 2007, following five years of acrimony and diplomatic stand-off between Qatar and Saudi Arabia over the role of the Qatari news network Al Jazeera; and in 2014, following the decision by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain to temporarily withdraw their ambassadors from Doha and threaten sanctions against Qatar in protest at its backing of the Muslim Brotherhood and its policies in Syria, Egypt, and Libya.

The failure of the GCC to facilitate negotiations during the blockade crisis undermined its future viability and threatened regional stability. So have the changing patterns of power on the global stage that have resulted in a growing disillusionment with the United States as a security provider and the absence of an alternative major external power to fill the security vacuum.⁹

INFORMAL SECURITY COALITIONS AND THE CHANGING REGIONAL ORDER

The institutional design of informal security coalitions challenges the assumption that security in the Middle East can, or should, be understood primarily in terms of regional complexes defined by proximity, adjacency, enmity, amity, and identity.¹⁰ These concepts have long been used to explain security cooperation among the three main groups of states in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia); the Mashreq (Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Israel); and the six Gulf monarchies of the GCC (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE).

Instead, membership of locally-led informal security coalitions transcends a particular geographic region. This is evident in the membership of the Yemen War Coalition and the IMCTC, both led by Saudi Arabia. Seven of the 15 countries that offered military and non-military support to the former at the start of the Yemen campaign were located between

5,500 and 8,000 kilometers from war-torn country.¹ Of the 40-plus members of the latter, 15 are located more than 6,500 kilometers from the Saudi capital Riyadh, the coalition's center of operations.¹¹

These coalitions also place few other limits on membership. They do not demand identity tests or block entry to states due to economic weakness or political differences. On a practical level, the absence of strict admission criteria enables the leader of these coalitions to overcome a major constraint of existing regional structures—the easy addition of new members. For example, on several occasions between the late 1980s and 2014, Saudi Arabia attempted to bring Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt into a re-imagined GCC security framework.¹² These efforts failed repeatedly due to the unwillingness of other GCC members to endorse the kingdom's plans for enlargement. But once the Yemen War began in March 2015, Saudi Arabia was able to bring all three into its nascent Yemen security coalition because of the absence of strict admission criteria and the lack of a veto by other members.

The key characteristics of these coalitions—flexibility and informality—will have important security and political implications for the regional order moving forward. On the political level, these coalitions, unlike more formal alliances, do not require members to be political partners. As the Israel-UAE-Bahrain relationship shows, membership of these coalitions can, due to their fluidity, foster new political relationships, even among those who do not have diplomatic relations with each other.¹³

This is particularly important for the future regional order because it means that informal security coalitions can bring together a diverse group of actors who may not engage directly in other contexts. This offers the possibility that these coalitions can develop into foreign policy instruments that facilitate strategic realignment and provide opportunities to enhance the status, reputation, and even the leadership roles of participants. The U.S. decision, in September 2021, to move combatant command responsibility for Israel from United States European Command (EUCOM) to United States Central Command (CENTCOM) was in line with this sort of thinking as it immediately increased the opportunities for Israel to work in the security sphere with countries that had not yet agreed to normalize relations with it.

At the same time, we have seen in recent years that the very same informality and flexibility that is the hallmark of these coalitions tends to hinder their effectiveness in terms of achieving their specific security missions. This has been very evident, notably regarding the failure of the Saudi-led Yemen War coalition to achieve its stated objectives. One important explanation is that while the informality and flexibility of these security coalitions make it easier for the leader to attract new members, both also make it harder for the leader to dominate the coalition or to impose its security preferences on other local actors, whether they are smaller or of a similar size, in terms of standing or power. This illuminates what is arguably one of the most important questions for the regional order in the Middle East in the coming years: How, in the absence of a clearly dominant external hegemon, will local middle powers striving for regional influence engage with each other? It is likely that this will be a major source of regional instability moving forward at times when these actors deem it important to challenge each other in the service of national interests or international ambitions.

i. These countries were Morocco, Malaysia, Senegal, the United States, Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

Informal security coalitions are notable for what they say about changing geopolitical realities in the Middle East. They are also novel in that they are regional security frameworks led by local middle powers rather than external great powers. But they have so far also proven to be relatively ineffective in two keyways: They have not provided opportunities for leaders to impose themselves on other members in the coalitions they lead, nor have these coalitions provided a framework capable of reshaping the regional order in line with the security preferences of the leader. In fact, they have either failed to achieve their military goals (Yemen), been unable to move from establishment to active cooperation (the IMCTC) or have tended to focus more on economic rather than military endeavors (the Israel-UAE-Bahraini relationship). For these reasons, and despite their appeal to ambitious local actors, in the coming years informal security coalitions are unlikely to effectively address the drivers of instability and insecurity across the Middle East regional order.

ENDNOTES

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THE GEOPOLITICS OF ENERGY: OPEC+ AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW ENERGY ORDER

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The author would like to thank Adel Abdel Ghafar, Galip Dalay, and most of all Nejla Ben Mimoune, for their valuable feedback and assistance.

- i. "U.S. shale revolution" is a term that refers to new ways of tight oil and gas extraction, massively introduced in the U.S. in the 2000s. They allowed the American hydrocarbon producers to significantly increase their domestic output within a relatively brief time. This not only changed the situation at the global oil market by turning the U.S. into one of the largest hydrocarbon producers but set an example for some other countries and created a shale oil industry whose life cycles and principles of functioning substantially differed from that of the conventional oil sector and often created challenges for traditional producers such as Saudi Arabia or Russia.
- ii. The fourth energy transition is often defined as the ongoing "transformation of the global energy sector from fossil-based to zero-carbon by the second half of this century. At its heart is the need to reduce energy-related CO₂ emissions to limit climate change." The current energy transition implies not only the growing role of renewable energy sources in the global economy but the complex combination of processes including decarbonization, energy efficiency improvement, digitalization, and reforming regulatory systems of energy trade, including through decentralization. All of these inevitably and mostly negatively affect the positions of traditional oil producers.
- iii. By 2017 the shale revolution significantly weakened both Saudi Arabia and the cartel's position in the oil market, shortened oil price cycles, and created a threat of long-term oversupply of hydrocarbons. More importantly, the shale revolution changed the structure of the oil market, turning the U.S. from one of the main oil consumers into oil producer, as well as redirecting resource flows towards Asia. Meanwhile the energy transition that was also partially boosted by the shale revolt sharply raised the question of possible stagnation and decline in global oil demand in the long-term, putting the future prosperity of conventional oil producers under a question.
- iv. Price damping is, in general, a risky endeavor as it launches price wars whose outcomes also depend on the ability of other players to change their output and decrease the cost of production. The 2014–2016 price war that Saudi Arabia was waging against shale oil producers by increasing its oil production showed that this strategy was only strengthening the Saudi rivals by getting them motivated to further cut production cost and adjust their output levels. Meanwhile, extremely moderate market gains were not justifying financial losses from low prices.

INTRODUCTION

OPEC+ 's decision to further reduce oil production by 1.66 million barrels per day since May 2023¹ clearly demonstrated that the cartel has both tools to regulate the oil market and the willingness to use them without giving much consideration to oil consumers' concerns.

The unexpected decision by OPEC+ to reduce its production levels has prompted discussions among market watchers about the strong connection between the oil cartel's new stage in its evolution, where it has regained its position as one of the most influential players in the market, and the start of the Russian war in Ukraine in February 2022.² Indeed, the 2023 OPEC+ starkly contrasts with the 2014–2016 OPEC that was losing control over the market and struggled to cooperate effectively with other conventional oil producers. Moreover, the unprecedented unity in decision-making between Saudi Arabia and Russia sets the current cartel apart from the 2017–2020 OPEC+, which suffered serious discipline issues and whose leaders even started a short-lived price war against each other in spring 2020.³

Yet, the process of OPEC's evolution into its current form was launched long before Putin's invasion of Ukraine, shaped by several factors that include the turbulent United States (U.S.) shale revolutionⁱ of the late 2000s-mid-2010s⁴ and the beginning of the fourthⁱⁱ energy transition.⁵ Under the influence of these factors,ⁱⁱⁱ in the late 2010s, the de-facto leader of the cartel, Saudi Arabia,⁶ was forced to deviate from its strategy of maximizing market share, which involved offering moderate oil prices and squeezing out competitors with higher production costs. Instead, it moved towards the concept of maximal monetization^{iv} of natural resources to generate funds necessary to develop its own economy in order to meet the needs of the ongoing energy transition.⁷ This approach implied, among other things, maintaining the cost of a barrel of oil at the highest possible level by regulating and cutting production volumes.

In addition, the cartel had to rebalance its relations with two other key players in the oil market—the U.S. and Russia. Having turned into a major producer and exporter of hydrocarbons, the U.S. was no longer as dependent on oil supplies from the Gulf. Moreover, as an oil-producing country, the U.S. was already partly in competition with the countries of the region. Inevitably, it affected the dynamics of U.S. relations with the OPEC leaders in the Gulf countries. Thus, the U.S.' limited reaction to the 2019 attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities, allegedly conducted by the Iran-backed Houthis, showed that the U.S. is no longer as interested in ensuring the security of the regional oil supplies as before.⁸ Meanwhile, since 2018, American politicians resumed their threats to adopt the so-called NOPEC (No Oil Producing and Exporting Cartels Act)^v legislation as a punishment against OPEC for raising oil prices, in addition to releasing oil from the strategic petroleum reserve to lower prices in 2022. This clearly demonstrated to the cartel that a once unconditional ally can—if necessary—move against the interests of the Arab Gulf monarchies.⁹

Simultaneously, in order to effectively influence the oil market and reduce the number of "free riders" who could benefit from OPEC's efforts cost-free, the cartel was forced to expand through cooperation with Russia, whose leadership by the end of the 2010s also acknowledged that the previous policy of distancing itself from OPEC had exhausted itself. The active rapprochement of OPEC, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and

Kuwait, with Moscow led in 2016 to the creation of the so-called OPEC+ when 10 more countries, including Russia, agreed to coordinate their oil output with OPEC members.¹⁰ The new structure was able to stop the drop in oil prices and help stabilize the market situation during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021, although relations between its members^{vi} were occasionally strained.¹¹ Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has become a new test for OPEC+, which it so far has managed to pass.

WAR: A GIFT AND A CURSE

In many ways, the Russian aggression against Ukraine was both a gift and a curse for the cartel. On the one hand, it clearly slowed down the process of energy transition, extending the age of oil and demonstrating the need for bigger international investments in the upstream sector. Profits from the high oil prices allowed cartel members to alleviate financial losses from the previous years and improve their macroeconomic indicators. On the other hand, the transition to a new model of global energy consumption was only delayed, and not canceled. Moreover, in order to successfully integrate into the new “post-oil” economic system while ensuring the continued demand for hydrocarbon resources, traditional oil producers need to start implementing ambitious and complex economic programs, including measures aimed at the decarbonization of oil, gas and petrochemical production, diversification of their economies, development of sustainable energy sources, and reconstruction of their own energy systems. All of these require substantial funds generated by oil incomes. Yet, as it stands, the current situation cannot guarantee a steady flow of oil.

Currently, the market is experiencing an unprecedented and intense struggle between political and economic factors that determine the dynamics of oil prices. And the outcome of this struggle is still unclear. Political factors, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine, instability in Libya, and the hypothetical failure of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program, are pushing prices up. Meanwhile, fundamental economic and market factors are pulling them down. Among these economic factors, the most important are China’s unpredictable demand, the global restructuring of oil flows due to the European Union (EU)’s decision to move away from its dependence on Russia’s hydrocarbons, and the expected slowdown in global economic growth caused by high oil and gas prices and disruptions in supply chains.

In normal circumstances, market factors have a stronger influence on the hydrocarbon trade than political factors, and their impact tends to be long-term.¹² Solutions for issues arising from geopolitical factors affecting the supply side are based on basic economic principles and relatively easy to implement. For instance, given the availability of alternatives, the market can restructure the supply chains to replace the “problematic source,” reducing the destabilizing influence of political factors. This was evident in the case of the 2019 U.S. sanctions against Venezuela, where heavy and sour oil that could not access the global market due to the sanctions was swiftly replaced by Russian equivalents.¹³

The economic factors, on the other hand, are mostly connected to the demand side and can be caused by deep and complex structural changes in the global economy. Their impact on the oil market is not always direct and finding solutions, as in the case of the on-

- v. The NOPEC legislation has been discussed in the U.S. Congress since 2000. Yet, after 2009 and until 2018, it received little attention from U.S. policymakers.
- vi. In different years, the OPEC+ unity was periodically challenged by emerging tensions within the cartel caused by the occasional lack of compliance to production quotas by some countries and their attempts to cheat on other members. For example, during 2017–2020, Russia was the most famous cheater, although periodically joined by other players such as Iraq, Kazakhstan, and Oman. Other OPEC+ members were dissatisfied with the distribution of production cuts and their volumes, and it is believed that some of the UAE officials were unhappy with their cut burden in the cartel, and finally, demands by some other countries such as Iran, Libya, and Venezuela to maintain special status within OPEC+ that allows them to ignore cartel production quotas.

going energy transition processes, are not always straightforward. Consequently, the impact of the economic fundamentals on the market situation is deeper and long-lasting.¹⁴ However, the world is currently going through abnormal times. Political factors no longer have short-term impact on the market that can be easily compensated for by the redirection of oil flows. The Kremlin's aggression in Ukraine and the accompanying "oil weapon" games between Russia and the West will affect oil prices for a long time, bringing acute unpredictability to the hydrocarbon market.¹⁵

MEETING A BRAVE NEW WORLD

To secure the interests of its key members, OPEC+ demonstrates a clear willingness to act. Existing capacities allow it to play the role of a swing producer. When taking into account the May reduction, OPEC+ can increase its production up to 4 million barrels per day, and even have a psychological impact on the market. Meanwhile, the center of decision—making has clearly shifted towards Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait.¹⁶ They have the ability to regulate production volumes and accurately implement the decisions taken on production cuts. The remaining players, such as Iran, Libya, and Venezuela, either suffer from political factors limiting their participation in the cartel activities or face the consequences of insufficient investment in the oil sector in the past years. They are not able to regularly maintain even existing production quotas, let alone increase output. Russia, although it announced a voluntary reduction in production of 500,000 barrels per day, has to accept the decrease in output anyway. It is estimated that, in 2023, sanctions can reduce its production volumes by 700,000 barrels per day. In other words, the era of various camps within OPEC and OPEC+ is, for now, in the past. The cartel's decisions are shaped by the three leaders, albeit not without contradictions among them. These leaders have taken on the bulk of the reduction in oil production to secure their right to leadership.¹⁷

Under these circumstances, the cartel's behavior is increasingly reflecting the interests of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. Thus, if in pre-pandemic and pandemic times OPEC+ was more interested in a stable market with reasonably high prices, reflecting the consensus opinion among the majority of cartel's participants, now, the decision to reduce production volumes from May 2023 is primarily driven by the traditional desire of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to raise prices as high as possible to generate immediate funds for their ambitious economic programs.¹⁸

By 2023, OPEC+ as a whole has become more focused on the interests of large producers among its main members, paying less attention to consumers. Relations with the latter are usually being developed at the bilateral level between a producing country and its client, prioritizing those countries that can guarantee a long-term demand of a cartel member's oil, which in the case of Arab monarchies would be Asian players. Under these circumstances, Western consumers are not a priority. Moreover, their claims that high oil prices can lead to economic stagnation are usually not considered by the cartel as a serious argument to revise production strategies. Given the increasingly destructive role of geopolitical factors in the oil market, the key OPEC+ players do not only consider Russia as being responsible for the situation, but also the West, which applied economic pressure against Russia's oil sector.¹⁹ Consequently, the U.S. and EU's calls upon the cartel to

increase production can be received in the Gulf with a certain irritation, as OPEC+ members are requested to sacrifice their incomes from high oil prices in order to compensate for the West's costs of confronting Russia, a confrontation they are not involved in and have no interest in.

DANCING WITH A BEAR

Under these circumstances, the cartel's reluctance to sever ties with Russia or increase oil production is increasingly portrayed by the media as the emergence of a "vicious alliance" between Moscow and OPEC+, which is not entirely accurate.²⁰ While the cartel's previous decisions to reduce production have served the interests of Moscow in its pursuit of extra funds for its military endeavors, it cannot be ruled out that some of the cartel's steps in 2022–2023 had an anti-American flair.²¹ There is also an undeniable sense of empathy towards Russia from the Saudi side driven by the Saudis' belief that the same sanctions mechanisms applied against Russia can be used against them. This, in turn, brings Riyadh closer to Moscow. Thus, the EU's initiative to apply a price cap on Russian oil was immediately projected by the Saudi leadership on their own country, making Riyadh demonstrate solidarity with Moscow by threatening to halt oil sales to buyers that dare to impose price limits on the Saudi oil—a threat similar to the one issued by the Kremlin to its clients.²²

However, Russian-OPEC+ relations are still more about coincidental interests, rather than the emergence of a coalition where one partner is ready to make sacrifices and concessions for the sake of the other. The OPEC+ leaders remain pragmatic, and their pragmatism dictates them to keep Russia among the OPEC+ members. First, they are interested in maximizing their profits and maintaining their influence on the market, which will remain difficult and unstable for years to come. This prioritizes the preservation of OPEC+ as an effective lever of influence. Without Russia, which unexpectedly maintains the status of a market leader, the OPEC+ would be less influential. In addition, it is also important to maintain discipline within the cartel, and a key principle is that cartel members refrain from exploiting each other's political and economic problems to expand their own production volumes. Moreover, increasing production at the request of the U.S. and the EU would waste a valuable tool of OPEC+ influence on the world market: spare production capacity. The cartel is not willing to do this for the sake of consumers. In these uncertain times, it is better to preserve this instrument for their own interests, especially considering the fact that the crisis in the world oil market is far from over.²³

MOVING FORWARD

Overall, the last year has been beneficial to OPEC+. It has restored its former influence, and its increased unity and relative discipline position the cartel as a major force in the oil market for an extended period in the future. Naturally, the cartel is not as omnipotent as it would like to be. The oil cuts of May 2023 did not lead to the immediate long-lasting sharp rise in oil prices: due to a number of reasons the price increase was delayed till mid-summer 2023.²⁴ Nevertheless, OPEC+ is not going to retreat from the tactics of active market regulation by changing production volumes. During their meeting on June 4, OPEC+ member countries not only decided to extend the current production cuts till the

end of 2024, but also adjusted the calculations of production quotas for the next year so that the nominal level of OPEC+ production maximally corresponded to its real capacities (this, in return, will help increase the effectiveness of the market regulation mechanisms). Additionally, the Saudi leadership agreed to voluntarily reduce its July production by an additional 1 million barrels per day, a decision that clearly shows the strong willingness of the OPEC+ leader to continue its struggle for better oil market conditions.²⁵

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NORMALIZATION AND ITS FLAWS: MOVING FROM THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS TO ARAB-IRANIAN RAPPROCHEMENT*

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**This chapter was originally drafted in April 2023. It was updated on October 29 to reflect the events of October 7, 2023, in relation to Israel-Arab normalization.*

INTRODUCTION

When Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain signed the so-called Abraham Accords on the White House lawn in September 2020, followed by Morocco in December of that year, the agreements were hailed as a transformative peace initiative that would usher in a new order for the Middle East.¹ After more than three years, however, the agreements have failed to register a significant regional impact, and have stalled since U.S. President Donald Trump left office in January 2021, with no new agreements signed under the Abraham Accords umbrella.

Beyond the advancement of bilateral ties between the signatories, the largest impact has been on the Palestinians in terms of augmenting the prevailing sense of hopelessness, despair, and marginalization of the Palestinian cause for liberation from under Israel's 56-year-old military occupation. Indeed, it has been argued that the effort by proponents of the normalization project to sideline the Palestinians and their quest for self-determination was instrumental in Hamas' calculus when it initiated its deadly attack on Israel on October 7, 2023—an event that has waylaid recent momentum in bringing Saudi Arabia into the fold of the Abraham Accords.

Although the normalization project is unlikely to move forward anytime soon, if ever, under post-October 7 circumstances, the appeal of Arab normalization with Israel had already been undercut by five major weaknesses inherent in the accords' formula. These include a lack of core substance, overreliance on the United States (U.S.), intolerable risk escalation, widespread unpopularity, and dependence on a tenuous context. As a result, countries in the region, including the UAE, have sought alternative normalization agreements that run counter to the logic and narrative of the Abraham Accords, but are more likely to have resounding regional—and perhaps global—impact because they are oriented around addressing sources of hostility and defusing tension in the Middle East's myriad conflicts.

THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

The diplomatic accords signed between Israel and three Arab states in 2020 built on years of backchannel relations between the parties. Although the Trump administration brokered the formal agreements, the basis for normalization was deemed a national interest of the parties, especially Israel and the UAE, whose example helps understand the drivers and implications for the Arab side.

For Israel, the motivation behind normalization is threefold. For years, the country has tried to rally the world against Iran, and normalization is partly about regionalizing the conflict and bringing those states who view Iran antagonistically into closer alignment. Second, it is intended to have a decisive effect on the long-standing debate within Israel that a continuation of Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians would lead to international isolation. By normalizing relations with some of the Palestinians' closest allies, the Israeli right-wing led by Benja-

min Netanyahu sought to close the book on this debate, dispensing with the land-for-peace formula that has long underpinned the international approach to peacemaking and upending the notion that the Palestinian question must be resolved *before* Israel can forge relations with the wider region.² Thirdly, it is about undermining the Palestinian support base in the region, which is not only important for Palestinian resilience, but also in the calculus of Western nations prodding Israel to resolve the Palestinian issue for the sake of a regional peace.

For the UAE, normalization was motivated by regional threat perception in the post-Arab Spring era and the imperative to not only survive in an increasingly volatile region beset by civil war, revolutionary upheaval, shifting geopolitical alignments, and intensifying state competition, but to emerge stronger in the reordered regional balance of power. In particular, two major threats have given impetus to forging closer ties to Israel: the growing strength and interventionism of Iran beyond its borders, and the spread of popular uprisings—for which the acquisition of cutting-edge surveillance technology has been a priority.³

The perception of U.S. retrenchment from the region and the potential loss of the U.S. as the Gulf's longstanding security guarantor have underscored the urgency of these threats. Indeed, in addition to Israel's own value as a security partner and as a purveyor of repressive technologies, the Gulf states view a closer relationship with Israel as an indirect means of preserving their partnership with Washington. Put simply, salvaging the U.S.'s security commitment is at the heart of the Gulf overture to Israel.⁴

Besides the Trump administration brokering the deals, the centrality of the U.S. to this equation has been demonstrated in numerous ways. It has provided tangible concessions to each agreement, including the promise of advanced military hardware to the UAE,⁵ recognizing Moroccan territorial claims to Western Sahara,⁶ and waiving a state-sponsor of terrorism designation for Sudan (the country has vacillated on following through with normalization since agreeing in late 2020).⁷

Moreover, in talks to get Saudi Arabia to join the normalizing countries, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is reported to be focused on what the U.S. can provide Saudi Arabia, especially in relation to its commitment to the region's security architecture, as well as help developing a civilian nuclear program, and putting fewer restrictions on U.S. arms sales.⁸ Thus, extracting concessions from the U.S. has been pivotal to the Arab side, rendering Israel as almost a passive contributor by comparison.

Nonetheless, stakeholders envisioned a regional security axis with the U.S. at its core, united in confronting Iran. Shortly after the signing of the Abraham Accords, the Pentagon announced a reorganization of the U.S. military's Central Command, which oversees operations in the Middle East, to include Israel, shifting it from under the European Command.⁹ This move, long advocated by Israel and its supporters, serves to enhance coordination between the Israeli military and Arab states that have not joined the Accords, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The new reality of normalization was also integrated into older ideas of region-wide military alliances that could act as a counterweight to Iran, including an "Arab NATO"—later rebranded as "Middle East NATO"—the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), and the Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD).¹⁰

WEAKNESSES AND LIMITATIONS

After Donald Trump left office in January 2021, the progression of normalization under the Abraham Accords banner stalled. Although the Biden administration wholeheartedly embraced the effort,¹¹ it was initially less willing to leverage other aspects of U.S. foreign policy in blind service of agreements, as Trump had done with Western Sahara, for example. Without that transactionalism, in which the U.S.—not Israel—provides the quid pro quo, the case for normalization is less appealing. Over the first half of 2023, however, this calculus changed for the White House, as normalization came to be seen as a significant U.S. national interest. In particular, concerns over Saudi Arabia possibly drifting into China’s political and economic orbit dovetailed with the escalating great power rivalry between Washington and Beijing, with the former seeming intent on keeping Riyadh within its sphere of influence and away from Beijing. As such, U.S. efforts for normalization gained momentum, as the Biden administration came to view it as a necessary pretext for delivering Riyadh major foreign policy concessions, such as a binding security treaty and the advancement of nuclear technology, items believed to be impossible to push through Congress independent of an Israel dimension.¹²

For its part, Saudi Arabia, long seen as the main prize of normalization, initially flirted with the process and made some gestures to Israel in terms of enhanced security coordination and opening its airspace. At the same time, the Saudi leadership repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which stipulates normalization in exchange for a Palestinian state.¹³ Moreover, the icy personal relationship between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and President Biden made a breakthrough unlikely.¹⁴ However, as the Biden administration’s interest in an agreement gained new impetus in the summer of 2023, the crown prince increasingly engaged with the possibility of normalizing with Israel in exchange for major advances in the U.S.-Saudi strategic partnership.¹⁵

Beyond Saudi Arabia, Sudan has also continued to waver on an agreement since signaling its intentions in late 2020, prompting Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen to visit Khartoum in February 2023.¹⁶ Other states that seemed likely candidates, such as Oman, have taken a sharp turn in the opposite direction. In December 2022, Oman’s parliament expanded its law criminalizing relations with Israel to include any meeting or communication with Israeli figures in sports, culture, and arts, both public and private.¹⁷ This initiative was preempted by less-likely-candidate Iraq in May 2022,¹⁸ and followed by Tunisia with draft legislation amid Israel’s post October 7 bombardment of the Gaza Strip.¹⁹

Still, the normalization project is not only a casualty of October 7, 2023, but of at least five fundamental and interrelated weaknesses that have sapped it of momentum over the past three years:

1. **First**, the Abraham Accords lack a substantive core achievement, or at least misrepresent and exaggerate what is being accomplished. Despite claiming to be peace treaties, the parties to the accords were never at war. Rather, they establish formal relations between states that previously had informal relations. Essentially, the accords are based on the fragile grounds of coalition-building for the purpose of securitization. Consequently, they face competition from potentially better alternatives for achieving that desired in-

terest. While they open avenues for trade with Israel, including a pioneering free trade agreement with the UAE, neither the UAE nor Bahrain need trade with Israel to be prosperous. Even the goal of using normalization to forge a more durable relationship with the U.S. was aspirational rather than concrete. By contrast, the Camp David peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, which has endured for over 40 years, because it is based primarily on ending chronic warfare between bordering countries and returning lost territory. All other achievements are ancillary.

2. A **second**, related weakness is that the agreements rely on the U.S. as a linchpin, providing the tangible benefits to the Arab parties for formalizing relations with Israel. Put differently, the agreements flow through a third party that is on the giving, rather than receiving, end of the rewards. As such, this endeavor is subject to the vicissitudes of U.S. democratic politics, including changes in power and shifting perceptions of U.S. public interests. Questions over U.S. reliability have already surfaced in recent years, especially as the country's extreme partisan polarization has seeped into its foreign policy.²⁰ This was plainly evident as the Trump administration rolled back many policies of the Obama presidency, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement with Iran. While that reversal may have served the interest of certain Gulf countries, it was also a demonstration of one administration invalidating a major agreement signed by its predecessor, thereby damaging the entire country's credibility. In the context of the high-stakes confrontation with Iran, such fickleness cannot be trusted. Furthermore, the American public has little appetite for further military engagement in the Middle East, especially if it is to protect other states' interests rather than their own. While Arab normalization might stem from a desire to share in the "ironclad" U.S. security commitment enjoyed by Israel, the Abraham Accords did not provide concrete assurances in that regard. Indeed, even the most tangible element of the agreement signed by the UAE, the promised sale of 50 F-35 fighter jets, never materialized.²¹
3. This ties directly to the **third** weakness: the severe escalation of risk. Predicated on forging an alliance to contain and confront Iran, these agreements are intrinsically antagonistic. However, as frontline states, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia are the most vulnerable to attack by Iran and its proxies. Unless the alliance provides foolproof deterrence against Iran, then such a confrontational posture only heightens the risk for the Gulf members to an intolerable level. The past few years have demonstrated the potential for escalation, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE facing repeated strikes on their civilian infrastructure. Although the impacts of these attacks were not catastrophic, they conveyed the message that such attacks were possible.

Even more important was the inadvertent message that the U.S. response to attacks on its allies would be lackluster at best. In September 2019, for example, two Saudi oil facilities suffered coordinated strikes from Iranian made drones and cruise missiles launched by Iran-backed Houthi fighters in Yemen. Despite being one of a number of assaults on Gulf infrastructure and shipping lanes that year, then-President Trump only deployed a few thousand American troops to the region to beef up defenses, while remarking that this "was an attack on Saudi Arabia, and that wasn't an attack on us."²² This episode, along with the consistently lukewarm response from the U.S. to

further attacks, has shaken confidence in America's protection and served as a wake-up call to those U.S. partners who were relying on it. Additionally, it has undermined the feasibility of establishing a region-wide security architecture such as MEAD. Given that the Gulf states have no control over Israel's military actions, including its "shadow war" against Iran, such direct linkages could make the Gulf states the target of Iranian retribution. The diplomatic adviser of UAE's president, Anwar Gargash, alluded to these concerns in July 2022 during Biden's visit to the region. In response to a question over UAE interest in joining a Middle East NATO, Gargash said, "We are open to cooperation, but not cooperation targeting any other country in the region, and I specifically mention Iran." Adding, "The UAE is not going to be a party to any group of countries that sees confrontation as a direction."²³

4. A **fourth** weakness lies in the overwhelming unpopularity of Arab-Israeli normalization in the region, including inside the states involved, according to surveys.²⁴ Although these states have operated under the premise that the Palestinian cause has lost traction, this notion has been continually challenged. The Arab popular response to Israel's horrifying bombardment of Gaza is the starkest example to date, with massive protests in solidarity with Palestinians held across the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond.²⁵ However, this was predated by other important post-Abraham Accord examples, including the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, where people from across the region continually displayed the Palestinian flag and showed solidarity with the Palestinian people throughout the monthlong event.²⁶ Given how deeply woven the Palestinian cause is into the cultural and political fabric of Arab societies, this is unlikely to change soon, despite substantial efforts to alter perceptions of Israel and Zionism in places like the UAE.²⁷ Given its unpopularity, normalization with Israel not only damages the regional image of those undertaking it, but it allows rivals like Iran and domestic opponents—the very forces they are trying to counter by aligning with Israel—to monopolize the more accepted position of supporting Palestinians and opposing Israel.²⁸
5. A **fifth**, related weakness is the significance of contextual factors in facilitating the agreements and the likeliness of near-term change. Not only did normalization occur in the Arab Spring era, in which the Palestinian issue was overshadowed by regional tumult, but during an enduring period of American hegemony in the Middle East, and at the tail end of the Oslo Accords era—a period in which the establishment of relations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization and daily cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, created an opportunity for some Arab states to informally engage with Israel.²⁹ Today, the pressures of the Arab Spring era have given way to a trend of regional de-escalation, American hegemony is being increasingly challenged, and the Oslo period has been replaced by a far-less conducive annexationist-apartheid paradigm.³⁰ Although the dust is far from settled, the October 7 attack and its aftermath will likely be the defining turning point away from the context that allowed Israel-Arab normalization to commence. Israel's merciless attacks on the civilians of the Gaza Strip, in full view of the Arab and Muslim worlds, have not only made forging a relationship with Israel politically untenable, but will increase the pressure on those states who already have relations to abandon them.

MOVING ON

Given these five weaknesses, it is not surprising that the Gulf states began rethinking their approach to Iran and seeking a *détente*. In August 2022, both the UAE and Kuwait reestablished diplomatic relations with Tehran after breaking ties six years earlier.³¹ Saudi Arabia also agreed to reestablish ties in a landmark agreement brokered by China in March 2023, after two years of negotiations.³² Shortly after, Bahrain was reported to be engaging in “low-profile exchanges” with Iran, and Jordan and Egypt were expected to follow suit in normalizing relations,³³ although none have yet to do so. The Gulf states are also altering their approach to regional security, evidenced by the UAE’s announcement in May 2023 that it had exited a U.S.-led maritime security coalition partly designed to counter Iranian naval activities,³⁴ while speaking publicly—along with Saudi Arabia³⁵—about regional security cooperation that includes Iran.³⁶

In contrast to the Abraham Accords, normalization with Iran is predicated on ending hostilities between the central parties to an agreement, while deescalating tensions intensified by their rivalry in the wider region. Moreover, it is based on core interests, including non-interference in the sovereignty of regional states and resolving conflicts like the war in Yemen, with the overarching goal of freeing up resources for advancing economic development. While China helped mediate the final agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, providing encouragement to follow through as their largest trading partner, it is not a guarantor and has reportedly not offered any concessions to facilitate the pact. For countries like Saudi Arabia, such an approach is preferable to normalization with Israel because it avoids the associated reputational damage. Indeed, the agreement was celebrated by Palestinians and others in the region rather than framed as an act of betrayal, as the Abraham Accords initially were. While this is not to say that the Arab-Iran rapprochement does not have its own set of weaknesses, or that its success is guaranteed, it does mean that its foundational logic is sounder.

CONCLUSION

Over the past three years, the Abraham Accords have demonstrated the limitations and weaknesses of a coalition agreement predicated on mobilizing against a mutually perceived threat, and an over-reliance on the U.S. While that does not mean the agreements are destined to unravel, having now established dynamics of their own, it does mean the process lacks impetus, and expansion is unlikely, especially following the events of October 7 and their aftermath. As such, the recent Arab-Israeli normalization has not been transformative to the regional order. If anything, its shortcomings provided the incentive to seek a more transformative rapprochement with Iran and helped precipitate October 7 by giving further cause to Palestinian actors seeking to break their increasing marginalization by the normalizing project. Moreover, the experience of normalization revealed the U.S. to be a less-than-reliable partner, thereby encouraging the Gulf states to diversify their foreign relations and balance against over-reliance. This was evident in the independent stances taken by the Gulf states over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in clear contravention of Washington’s appeals, as well as an unmistakable intention to build strong relations with Beijing. Furthermore, regional diplomacy has also become more pronounced as states with a vested in-



terest in de-escalation, such as Iraq and Oman, have taken it upon themselves to mediate between regional powers to establish a more stable order. In the wake of a paradigm shifting event like October 7, it is very difficult to predict outcomes. But amid corresponding atrocities, it is difficult to envision a near-term path toward reconciliation.

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SECTION TWO
REGIONAL POWER PLAYERS



Leaders pose for a photo ahead of the 32nd Arab League Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on May 19, 2023. Palestinian Presidency / Handout / Anadolu Agency (Photo by Palestinian Presidency / Handout / ANADOLU AGENCY / Anadolu Agency via AFP)





REGIONAL POWERS AND THE REGIONAL RESET: THE CASE OF SAUDI ARABIA

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The author would like to extend his thanks to the team at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs and especially Nejla Ben Mimoune for the valuable feedback and assistance received.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East regional order is undergoing a period of transition, as major external powers like the United States (U.S.), Russia, and China reassess their roles, while regional states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Türkiye, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) assert increased agency. Saudi Arabia recognizes that in order to serve both its economic and security interests in this shifting environment, a diversified set of partnerships is required. The U.S. remains the integral security partner for the kingdom, but its predominant position is no longer uncontested.

A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Saudi Arabia's current foreign policy should not be viewed as an ideological adjustment but rather as a pragmatic response. Examples of this approach include the rapprochement with Qatar within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and improved relations with Türkiye. The trilateral statement signed between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China in March 2023, paving the way for the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran, underlines this pragmatism. With the Saudi leadership determined to continue de-escalation efforts in the region, China was seen by the kingdom as the partner that could bring Iran to the table due to its ties with Tehran. Nevertheless, the agreement does not signal a strategic shift by the kingdom from West to East; it simply aligns with Riyadh's interests.

Regional stability is essential for Saudi Arabia to move forward on the vital economic diversification plans as laid out in the Saudi Vision 2030, both to attract the needed foreign investment and to give the kingdom the competitive edge to succeed in an increasingly multipolar setting. Continued tensions as illustrated by the Iranian attacks on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019 and the constant barrage of missile and drone attacks from the Houthis in Yemen, endanger the Saudi project.¹ In addition, a potential future altercation between the U.S., Israel, and Iran over the latter's nuclear program would inevitably involve Saudi Arabia into a direct conflict with unknown consequences. Riyadh views both scenarios as unacceptable risks.

Instead, Saudi Arabia has concluded that it can no longer just rely on a single external power and that an alternative pathway forward is needed, particularly vis-à-vis Iran. The leadership in Riyadh recognizes that a multitude of policy tools and approaches must be considered to move the region out of its perennial cycle of instability.² This includes engagement and diplomatic efforts, containment, and deterrence policies, as well as robust national economic and defense positions.

AN EMPHASIS ON DOMESTIC PRIORITIES

Saudi Arabia's focus on its national transformation program and its economic development and diversification is part of a long-term strategy to position itself as a regional leader in the Middle East. However, as of 2023, Saudi Arabia does not hold such a position: Its leadership within the GCC is limited; it struggled to resolve the crisis in Yemen; its role in promoting its political and economic agenda in Iraq is marginal at best; and its overall

influence in the Middle East has diminished significantly compared to past decades, for example during the reign of King Faisal or King Fahd. To rebuild its influence, Saudi Arabia must first address its domestic challenges.

To focus on domestic priorities, Saudi Arabia will follow a policy of withdrawing from costly commitments and avoid entanglements with low returns. Yemen and Lebanon exemplify this approach. In Yemen, the kingdom is pursuing negotiations with both the Houthi leadership and the Yemeni Presidential Council, while trying to produce an arrangement to reign in Iranian interventionism.³ In Lebanon, Riyadh has announced that the country requires Lebanese rapprochement rather than a Saudi-Iran settlement. As Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan stated in March 2023: "Lebanon must see where its interests lay. Politicians must put Lebanese interest above all others."⁴

Saudi Arabia recognizes that it has lost direct interests in Arab affairs as other urgent matters, such as external security and domestic reform take precedence. The costs associated with regional involvement have been high while the returns have diminished. As a result, there is a careful examination underway in Saudi Arabia on its continued investment in external matters with limited tangible results.⁵ This also applies to the economic aid and development assistance. As the Saudi Minister of Finance stated at Davos in January 2023, the policy of no strings attached is no more.⁶

POTENTIAL RISKS IN PLAY

Naturally, there are inherent risks in the new Saudi approach. The evolving relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia is illustrative of the dichotomy the kingdom can find itself in. While returning to the two countries' trusted relationship is proving difficult, finding alternatives is proving even more complicated. As Saudi Arabia continues to doubt U.S. reliability, and the U.S. continues to "recalibrate" its relations with the kingdom, Riyadh is opening the door to others, including Beijing, Moscow, New Delhi, Seoul, and Ankara.⁷ However, this strategic diversification has its limitations, especially when Saudi Arabia lacks the capacity to fill any existing vacuum. In order not to lose any allies, Riyadh must play a careful balancing game, with the U.S. remaining a key external ally in this equation.

Moving forward with the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Iran should not be seen as heralding a new era of Saudi-Iran friendship or a mitigation of Saudi concerns about Iran's regional behavior. The fact remains that the actual sources of regional discontent have not been addressed and the road to a more stable and lasting regional security arrangement remains long and complicated. In the meantime, Saudi relations with Iran and Israel should not be seen as being completely mutually exclusive, given that the core issues defining Saudi-Iran enmity remain unresolved. As part of its pragmatism, Riyadh will continue to invest in its ties to Tel Aviv, which itself reveals the limitations in outreach to Tehran at the moment. Riyadh still believes a Palestinian peace must come before normalization rather than the other way around as exemplified by the UAE and Bahrain in the Abraham Accords.

Through its de-escalation efforts with Iran and Türkiye, Saudi Arabia wants to buy itself time to strengthen its own capabilities and ultimately become the leading political and economic


power in the wider Middle East. This pursuit could come, however, at the expense of the solidarity with fellow GCC states, such as the UAE and Qatar. They are pursuing their own national interest approach and are overall unwilling to accept Riyadh as the *primus inter pares* (a first among equals) within the GCC, as in the past. Examples of this shift include the announcement in February 2021 that global companies must move their headquarters inside the kingdom in order to be eligible for state contracts, and the decision to establish a new national airline that will compete with the likes of Emirates and Qatar Airways.⁸ Ties between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have already cooled significantly since the establishment of the Saudi-UAE coordination council by the leaders of both countries in late 2017,⁹ potentially leading to new flashpoints on the horizon.

CONCLUSION

The new feature of the evolving strategic landscape in the Middle East is the increased agency of regional states, with a greater focus on pursuing national interests and showing less deference to the policies of external powers, including the U.S. Saudi Arabia wants to regain its independence in its foreign policy direction and intends to position itself as a geographic power within the connectivity triangle of Europe, Asia, and Africa in the years to come. Saudi Arabia has a clear goal of regaining its leading position in the Middle East. The dimensions and implications for both the wider Middle East and the international community should not be underestimated.

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NAVIGATING POWER DYNAMICS: IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDST OF A MIDDLE EAST RESET

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2023, Iran quickly turned from a target of the ongoing regional reset in the Middle East to an active participant in the realignment dynamics among regional powers. The Arab-Israeli normalization since mid-2020, known as the Abraham Accords, has been driven by a shared concern about Tehran's regional policy and a common desire to contain the Islamic Republic. Similarly, the Arab states' growing diplomatic outreach to Bashar Assad has been, at least partly, aimed at counterbalancing Iran's extensive influence in Syria.¹ In other words, Arab states seem to have concluded that their lack of diplomatic ties with Damascus over the past decade has deprived them of any leverage to influence the Assad government's decisions, while leaving a vacuum Tehran has willingly filled. Other major regional realignment trends, such as Ankara's rapprochement with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and the intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) reconciliation, though not necessarily against Iran, have taken place without Tehran's direct involvement.

However, the recent agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to revive diplomatic relations has initiated a new regional diplomatic process that could contribute to a broader reset in the Middle East by improving relations between Iran and the Arab states. Following the signing of the agreement with his Saudi counterpart in Beijing, Ali Shamkhani, the former Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), traveled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and then Iraq to discuss cooperation opportunities with these two Arab states. Additionally, there have been ongoing contacts between Tehran and Manama to resume relations,² and there is even speculation about a potential transformation in Iran-Egypt relations. Tehran severed diplomatic ties with Cairo shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution due to Egypt's decision to grant asylum to the ousted Shah. The Islamic Republic has also been at odds with Egypt over the latter's decision to make peace with Israel.³ But what has prompted Iran to adopt this proactive approach to regional diplomacy? What are the chances of success for this new approach and what risks and opportunities lie ahead?

ECONOMIC FACTORS

In recent months, the economic situation in Iran has continued to worsen. According to official statistics, Iran's inflation rate in the past year (March 21, 2022 to March 20, 2023) was 46.5 percent,⁴ although the actual inflation rate is estimated to be much higher. For instance, Steve Hanke, Professor of Applied Economics at Johns Hopkins University, estimated Iran's annual inflation at 107.55 percent.⁵ Concurrently, the value of Iran's currency has experienced a sharp decline, with a 33 percent drop in the second half of December 2022 alone,⁶ and this trend has continued into 2023. Other economic indicators have also crumbled, with official statistics suggesting that at least one-third of the population lives below the poverty line,⁷ while the unemployment rate has risen to 9.7 percent.⁸ Apart from government inefficiency, the lack of meaningful foreign economic relations has been identified as one of the main factors in Iran's economic crisis.

The failure to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) has kept U.S. sanctions against Iran in place, effectively hindering international trade

and foreign investment. Ongoing tensions between Iran and its Persian Gulf neighbors have diminished the appetite, particularly among regional countries, to develop trade relations with Tehran and increased the overall investment risk associated with Iran.

After two years of on-and-off negotiations to restore the JCPOA, it appears that Iran and the other parties to the agreement have lost hope for its revival. Furthermore, Iran's support for Russia in the Ukraine war by providing drones to Moscow has further complicated Iran's relations with the West, leading to new sanctions against the Islamic Republic. In these circumstances, regional de-escalation is the only viable option for Iran to improve its economy. On the one hand, Iranian leaders hope that improving relations with Arab states will encourage Iran's wealthy neighbors to invest and foster trade. In fact, Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan has already indicated that there are no obstacles to Saudi investment in Iran.⁹ On the other hand, reducing tensions between Iran and its neighbors can bring stability and, therefore, provide incentives for third parties, such as China, to invest in Iran. This helps explain why Beijing mediated the agreement between Tehran and Riyadh. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have expressed interest in participating in China's megaproject, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, a critical prerequisite for the BRI's successful extension to the Middle East appears to be regional stability, which cannot be achieved as long as the two regional powers are engaged in a heated conflict.

GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS

Over the past three years, Tehran has witnessed changes in regional power dynamics, not only in the Middle East but also in the South Caucasus, with potential long-term negative impacts on Iran's interests. The signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 between Israel on the one hand, and the UAE and Bahrain on the other amounted to a strategic nightmare for Iran, which expanded Israel's intelligence presence and its influence in areas close to Iran's borders.¹⁰ Israel has also strengthened its foothold in Iran's northwestern borders by developing relations with Azerbaijan, while its relations with Türkiye, another neighbor of Iran, have also warmed up. In recent months, there have been increasing signs of military cooperation between the signatories of the Abraham Accords.¹¹ Although those actors might not see eye to eye when it comes to a potential military move against Iran, with Iran's Arab neighbors being more cautious in that regard. But even an indirect involvement by those countries, in terms of providing logistical or intelligence support for an Israeli attack, would be detrimental enough to Iran's interests and security. Tehran fears the formation of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli-Turkish front against Iran, especially with speculations about the possibility of Saudi Arabia joining the normalization process with Israel.

Other regional realignment trends, such as Arab normalization with Syria and reconciliation between Qatar and other members of the GCC, have also been against Iran's interests. The normalization with Syria can increase Assad's options and reduce Iran's relative influence, while the reconciliation within the GCC restricts Iran's potential to exploit disputes among Arab states to its own benefit. For instance, during the diplomatic crisis between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, and Egypt on the other (2017–2021), Tehran made efforts to expand ties with Doha, trying to turn Qatar into a partner in the Arab world.¹²

All these trends have led Iran to believe that a new regional architecture is being formed against its interests. Nearly all major regional actors, together with global powers, from the United States (U.S.) to China and Russia, are involved in the new architecture to maintain stability in the region. In other words, it would be costly for Iran to undermine this emerging structure, be it directly or through proxy groups. Instead, a more rational alternative is to try to influence the emerging regional order, particularly in terms of reducing potential threats, by contributing to its construction. This is one of the main factors driving Iran to develop relations with its neighbors. In other words, Iran's reset with the region is a response to the broader reset process underway in Tehran's absence. When it comes to Israel, Tehran hopes that improving relations with GCC states could slow down the pace of their military cooperation with Israel. At the very least, Iran expects the new understanding with its Arab neighbors to prevent them from playing any direct or indirect role in Israel's activities against Tehran—from the ongoing sabotage operations inside Iran to a potential military strike against the country.

TRANS-REGIONAL FACTORS

Iran's changing relationships with Western and non-Western powers have influenced its calculations of the costs and benefits of participating in the regional reset. Since mid-2022, Iran's relations with the U.S. and European states have entered a highly tense phase. Three main factors have contributed to this development: first, Iran's nuclear escalation, in terms of increasing the level of uranium enrichment and reducing cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency; second, the Islamic Republic's support for Russia's aggression against Ukraine; and third, the violation of human rights and the violent suppression of nationwide protests in Iran. The last two factors have resulted in the suspension of any meaningful diplomatic track between Iran and the West, even regarding the revival of the JCPOA. Alongside the economic consequences, including the ongoing sanctions, those developments have increased Iran's international isolation. In that sense, one of Iran's motivations for developing relations with Arab states is to mitigate the risk of further isolation.

China's role as a facilitator in the Iran-Saudi agreement is therefore of great importance to Iran. From Tehran's perspective, relations with non-Western powers, particularly China, are part of an anti-isolation policy. In other words, the Chinese-mediated Iran-Saudi agreement is where the two main elements of the Islamic Republic's anti-isolation strategy intersect. At the same time, Iran holds a fundamentally optimistic view of China's role in the Middle East, which increases the likelihood of Iran accepting Chinese-initiated regional plans. In general, Tehran believes that, unlike the U.S., China's influence in the Middle East is constructive, as it does not ignore the interests of one actor for the sake of another. Some in Iran even believe that China can contribute to a new type of Iran-Saudi relations akin to the U.S.-facilitated post-World War II reconciliation between France and Germany.¹³ Finally, it should be noted that in the absence of meaningful relations between Iran and the West, China, through its economic and trade relations with Tehran, is the only global power with significant leverage to influence Iran's foreign policy decisions. It appears that China is now more inclined than ever to use this leverage.

THE CASE FOR CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

Iran's inclination toward improving relations with its Arab neighbors and participating in the regional reset is driven by a combination of internal and external factors, including economic, security, and geopolitical considerations. The complex and intertwined nature of those factors has made Tehran more serious than at any time in the past decade in pursuing a policy of reconciliation and realignment. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that the main actor in this sphere on the Iranian side is not the Ebrahim Raisi administration's Ministry of Foreign Affairs but the SNSC. As the highest decision-making body in the field of foreign and security policy directly accountable to the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, the SNSC's involvement indicates that the decision to reassess regional policy has been made at the highest level of Iran's political system, potentially lending it greater reliability and durability compared to the Rouhani administration's failed initiatives to engage with the region.

However, there is a significant contradiction in Iran's approach that requires caution in drawing any definitive conclusions about the current trend. Iran perceives the development of its regional relationships not as a complement or prelude to a broader diplomatic opening with the international community but as an alternative to it. For example, Ali Bagheri, Iran's deputy foreign minister for political affairs, distinguishes between "friends" (Iran's neighbors) and "enemies" (the U.S. and its Western allies) stating, "Regarding our enemies, we seek to eliminate their threat, but regarding our friends, we seek to have zero problems."¹⁴ This diverges from the approach pursued by Iran's neighbors, who seek to develop relations with various global powers while pursuing a regional reset policy. This situation harbors the potential for new tensions and frictions. Tehran believes there is no contradiction between seeking reconciliation with neighbors and confronting the U.S. in the region. Consequently, tensions increased between the U.S. and Iran-backed groups in Syria shortly after the Iran-Saudi agreement.¹⁵ In case of an escalation between Tehran and Washington, regional states will exercise greater caution in their relations with Iran.

Furthermore, the notion that it is possible to attract investment from regional countries without lifting international sanctions is highly problematic. After all, Arab states enjoying extensive trade relations with the U.S. are not expected to jeopardize their business interests in the West for the sake of improving relations with Iran. This could lead to a vicious circle, as unfulfilled economic expectations from restored relations with Arab states may prompt Tehran to reconsider its regional approach, creating new frictions between the sides. Overall, the recent agreements are only the first step in a path whose ultimate success depends on multiple factors, some of which are beyond the direct control of the regional parties.

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TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY AND THE MIDDLE EASTERN ORDER

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INTRODUCTION

Normalization and reset define the contemporary politics of the Middle East and Türkiye's policy towards the region. The China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal,¹ the resolution of the intra-Gulf crisis, and the thaw in Türkiye's relations with the Arab Gulf states reflect this trend. This new period is driven by the unpredictability and unreliability of the United States (U.S.), the idea that the region has entered a post-Arab Spring phase, and by the economic needs of the region's states, including Türkiye. Even though the contest over a new regional order, as was the case during the Arab Spring, is losing steam, the need for a functional and legitimate regional order is as acute as ever.

TÜRKIYE AND THE QUESTION OF REGIONAL ORDER

The authoritarian status quo that defined Middle Eastern politics for decades was first broken by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and then destroyed by the Arab Spring. On both cases, Ankara was attentive to the feelings and aspirations of the people in the region and in favor of the construction of a legitimate regional order, not least during the Arab Spring. To be precise, in the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, despite immense U.S. pressure to align with its position, the new government of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) resisted this pressure and rejected the U.S. demand to use Turkish soil to attack Iraq.² This stance signaled the direction Ankara intended to take in its Middle Eastern affairs.

Türkiye's opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq marked a departure from its decades-long so-called "traditional foreign policy" as a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, seeing the region through Western/U.S. perspectives. It is worth noting that during the 1990 Gulf War, Ankara was a member of the U.S.-led military coalition, offering its bases to NATO for operations against Saddam Hussein. In contrast, during the 2003 Iraq invasion, Ankara not only voiced its opposition but also spearheaded a regional effort to prevent the crisis. Türkiye initiated "Iraq's Neighboring Countries" meetings, aiming to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis and preventing the invasion, and then, in the aftermath of the invasion, to prevent a civil war between different ethno-sectarian groups and proxy wars between regional rivals in Iraq.³

Türkiye's diplomatic activism demonstrated it was no longer a passive bystander to the regional affairs in the Middle East. Building on this pro-active approach, Türkiye hosted the political leadership of Hamas in 2006 following their victory in the Palestinian election,⁴ defying the Western policy of isolating the group. Again, to the chagrin of the U.S., while serving as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2010, Türkiye, in partnership with Brazil, managed to broker an agreement with Iran on its contentious nuclear program.⁵ The West bluntly and shortsightedly rebuffed this effort.

SOURCES OF TENSION

From the Justice and Development (AK) Party coming to power in 2002 until the onset of the Arab Uprisings, Türkiye enjoyed close and cordial relations with almost all region-

al powers, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt, until the Arab Spring started driving them apart. Ankara championed the Arab Spring and its transformation of domestic and regional political orders in the Middle East. It supported the Islamists, who emerged as the leading actors during this process and came to power in several states, such as Egypt (until 2013) and Tunisia.⁶ In contrast, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Cairo (after 2013) fiercely opposed this process, including democratic political transitions and a new regional order.⁷ Likewise, the Syrian conflict drove wedges between Türkiye and Iran—while Ankara supported the Syrian opposition, Tehran threw its weight behind the regime.

Therefore, the Arab Spring ushered in an era of acrimony and competition between Türkiye and these regional states. This rivalry later acquired a geopolitical form as well. For instance, Libya became a context in which Türkiye, the UAE, and Egypt engaged in a fierce rivalry—Ankara supports the UN-recognized government in Tripoli whereas the other countries have supported Khalifa Haftar’s forces and his self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA).⁸ This antagonism influenced the Eastern Mediterranean crisis, with Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Riyadh, and Tel Aviv siding with Greece and Cyprus. Therefore, the feud between Türkiye and its erstwhile regional rivals paved the ground for the emergence of a realignment between Athens and these actors in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁹

DRIVERS OF REGIONAL RESET

As the Arab Spring was the main source of contention between Türkiye and its former regional antagonists, the idea that the region has entered a post-Arab Spring phase lays the foundation for the thaw and normalization in their relations. On top of this, as mentioned above, the U.S.’ unpredictability and unreliability, coupled with the reduction of its regional security commitments and the regional countries’ growing economic needs have facilitated this process of normalization. In Türkiye’s case, there is an added geopolitical rationale, which is to break the emerging realignments between Greece/Cyprus, the Arab Gulf states, and Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, in the case of Iran, all signs point to more tension, as Ankara and Tehran have opposing policies in Iraq, Syria, and the South Caucasus. Despite Türkiye’s declared position to being open to normalize ties with the Assad regime,¹⁰ the gap between both sides is too wide to be bridged, making it unlikely for such a normalization to occur anytime soon. Predictably, Ankara rejected the Syrian regime’s call for the withdrawal of Turkish military forces from Syria.¹¹ As long as Türkiye continues to face security risks from Syria—be it from the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and People Defense Units (YPG), or extremist groups such as the Islamic State or Al-Qaida—and as long as the Syrian regime fails to confront these security threats, Ankara will continue to deal with these threats independently, and maintain its military presence in Syria.

Moreover, the persisting instability in Syria and the regime’s uncooperative stance hinder the safe return of Syrian refugees to their homeland. Similarly, the regime’s belief that it has won the conflict has led to its dismissive approach towards the demands of the Syrian

opposition. However, this perspective is short-sighted and flawed. A significant part of the country is controlled by the PYD, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham,¹² and despite enormous support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, the regime is still incapable of running the whole country. As a result of all these factors, the prospect for normalization between Ankara and Damascus is very slim at this stage.

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY POST-ELECTION

After his electoral triumph in the presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023, President Erdogan unveiled his new cabinet, which was well-received internationally and domestically. The influential former head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Hakan Fidan, was appointed as Foreign Minister. Fidan has enjoyed a successful career at the helm of different branches of Turkish bureaucracy, particularly as head of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), and MIT. During his leadership, both institutions have gained global prominence, and Fidan's tenure has elevated MIT to a central role in Türkiye's foreign and security policies and intelligence complex. With over a decade of experience shaping Türkiye's foreign and security strategies—spanning periods of confrontation with regional adversaries and phases of reconciliation—his appointment signifies Türkiye's continued pursuit of autonomous foreign and security policies on the global stage. This commitment entails maintaining an ambitious foreign policy agenda while simultaneously repairing relations with former rivals, such as the Arab Gulf states.¹³ Similarly, the appointment of İbrahim Kalın as the new MIT head, a respected figure with extensive experience as Erdogan's chief foreign policy and national security advisor, reinforces this positive trajectory.

In a parallel move, Erdogan appointed another well-respected figure, Mehmet Simsek, as finance minister. This signals a greater alignment between Türkiye's foreign and economic policies in the new era.¹⁴ Erdogan's recent visit to the Gulf in July clearly illustrates this desired harmony between Ankara's foreign and economic policies. During this visit, Türkiye and the UAE inked business deals estimated to be worth \$50.7 billion.¹⁵ Likewise, Ankara secured deals worth tens of billions of dollars with Qatar, a close ally, as well as Saudi Arabia.^{xvi} The economy will undoubtedly occupy a central position in Türkiye's relations with its former Gulf antagonists in the new era.

Finally, this process of normalization has already translated into a de-escalation in the regional conflicts, particularly in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye, the UAE, and Egypt have not changed their Libya policy in any fundamental way. However, they have refrained from any form of escalation and established channels of communication on the subject. As a result, there has been a relative lull in Libya's infamous proxy wars. In this new phase, it is reasonable to expect more dialogue and coordination between Türkiye and its former regional rivals in addressing regional conflicts and crises, spanning from Libya to Iraq and Sudan. This shift marks a pivotal departure from the confrontational stances of the recent past.

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REDEFINING PRIORITIES: SMALL STATES' FOREIGN POLICY IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

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The author would like to thank Galip Dalay and Nejla Ben Mimoune for their support, along with Michael Huijjer for linguistic copyediting and Françoise Freifer for editing the Arabic translation.

INTRODUCTION

Regional powers have re-focused their national and foreign policy priorities on advancing domestic development goals, recalibrating their foreign policy, and prioritizing their national interests across the region. They have spearheaded what appears to be a nascent regional reset that centers around ending old disputes, improving ties with neighbors, and de-escalating regional tensions through more dialogue and diplomacy. The reset reflects how Gulf Arab states, in particular, see quelling regional tensions as essential to securing their domestic economic goals and protecting their national security amidst a perceived withdrawal of the United States (U.S.) from the region. The economic fallout from COVID-19 helped accelerate this trend. The way in which Saudi Arabia supports its Vision 2030¹ economic objectives with a foreign policy that includes more dialogue and diplomacy with former foes such as Qatar, Türkiye, Iran, and Syria, is a prime example of this.¹

But how have smaller states reacted to this regional reset? It was smaller states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that led the charge for many of these changes. Their agenda of regional reconciliation and economic connectivity included normalization with Israel, Bashar Assad's regime in Syria, Türkiye, and Iran. On the other hand, the UAE hesitated to end the blockade of Qatar, even if they eventually succumbed to Saudi pressure to end the Gulf rift. Many of these normalization efforts have helped de-escalate regional tensions, but it is still unclear if this regional reset will take root and if it can sustainably contribute to improving regional security in the long-term.

REGIONAL RESET—WHEN AND WHY DID IT START FOR GULF STATES?

Global factors influenced Gulf regional powers to embark on this regional reset, including uncertainty about the U.S. security commitment, as well as the acceleration of a multipolar global power whereby both China and Russia, in particular, became increasingly significant economic and security players in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The perception that regional powers could not rely on the U.S. as a security guarantor persuaded them to engage the MENA region with a more balanced foreign policy that included both containment and diplomacy. This manifested in what many experts have called a “zero-enemies-in-the-neighborhood” foreign policy.²

Changes in Saudi and Emirati foreign policy toward Iran represented one of the earliest examples of this.³ The two largest Gulf Arab economies moved away from supporting former U.S. President Donald Trump's “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, in favor of pursuing dialogue and de-escalation.⁴ After observing how Trump's “maximum pressure” policy heightened tensions with Iran and led to attacks from proxy groups aligned with Iran against Saudi and Emirati interests, including the attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure and shipping vessels in the Gulf of Oman in 2019 attributed to Iran,⁵ both countries began quiet outreach to Tehran in 2019 to lower the temperature. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were frustrated by what they perceived as an inadequate U.S. security response to attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure and international shipping around the Gulf of Oman. Saudi and Emirati leaders began adjusting their Iran policy when they realized that their investments in the Trump presidency and his policies did not lead to concrete U.S. security commitments when they needed it most.

i. All of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have similar development visions and their domestic and foreign policies are increasingly focused on national development plans to manage the energy transition away from oil and to implement greater economic diversification. Despite these ambitious plans and some notable progress, all these economies still rely heavily on hydrocarbon revenues.

The arrival of Joseph R. Biden's administration in January 2021 contributed to important elements of the regional reconciliation push, particularly regarding the formal end of the 2017–2021 blockade of Qatar. Biden, along with many members of Congress, attacked Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's human rights record, in particular the Yemen war and the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.ⁱⁱ Many Democrats viewed the blockade of Qatar as one item on a long list of problems instigated by Saudi Arabia in the region. Kuwait and the U.S. attempted to mediate in the Gulf rift, but progress was limited until Riyadh seemed to soften its position in an attempt to gain favor with the incoming Biden administration and address some of the underlying political disputes destabilizing the Gulf region.

Other factors, such as the drastic economic fallout from COVID-19 in 2020, also played a role in cultivating a regional reset. U.S. crude oil prices traded for a short time below \$0 in early 2020.⁶ The global COVID-19 lockdowns led to an unprecedented decline in oil demand that sent markets into free-fall.⁷ This shock to energy markets acted as a powerful reminder that Gulf Arab states needed to advance their economic diversification agenda. It also led to a renewed focus on domestic economic welfare and advancing economic diversification in all the Gulf Arab states. This translated to a greater emphasis on quelling regional tensions and cultivating regional economic connectivity. Even as oil and gas prices surged amidst Russia's invasion of Ukraine,⁸ Gulf Arab officials remained acutely aware of the urgency to pursue economic diversification agendas and the limited window to rely on substantial hydrocarbon wealth.

SMALLER STATES: THE CASE OF THE UAE

Where do smaller states fit into this regional reset? Smaller Gulf Arab states must navigate the difficulties of being caught between the region's two major powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. To avoid the pitfalls of regional and global power competition, the UAE pursues a policy of balancing and strategic hedging among great powers like the U.S., Russia, and China, as well as between Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Iran.⁹ Despite this balancing act, the UAE often aligns itself with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, even if there are points of divergence with these partners' agendas as well. The UAE provides a helpful case study that demonstrates how smaller Gulf Arab states have recalibrated their foreign policy as a response to the structural changes in the region.¹⁰

According to Emirati officials, their country's normalization efforts represent an integral part of their recalibrated "zero enemy" foreign policy, as well as their regional economic connectivity agenda.¹¹ The goal of this new regional foreign policy is to reap major economic dividends and bolster the national development of the UAE. However, this is not the only explanation behind the UAE's new foreign policy. Some of the UAE-backed interventions post-2011 in regional flashpoints, including Yemen, Libya, Syria, and the Horn of Africa faced major challenges and caused reputational damage to the UAE. This contributed to a serious reckoning in Emirati foreign policy in recent years.¹² In 2021, after the economic fallout of COVID-19, the UAE announced the "Principles of the 50," which highlighted that "[the] UAE's foreign policy is a tool that aims to serve the higher national goals, the most important of which is the UAE's economic interests."¹³

ii. Saudi Arabia denounces U.S. Senate resolutions on Khashoggi, Yemen.

The UAE's recalibrated foreign policy is manifesting differently across the region's flashpoints. While Abu Dhabi relies more on economic soft power and diplomacy, indirect hard power remains part of their power projection arsenal in certain regional flashpoints, such as Yemen and in certain areas in the Horn of Africa. Overall, there is a notable shift toward greater engagement, in line with their "zero-enemies" foreign policy. This shift is most evident in their normalization strategies with Iran and Syria. The zero-sum vision that marked the Gulf rift years (2017–2021) and exacerbated proxy competition in the Horn of Africa and Libya, for example, seems to have diminished, following the cautious, uneven implementation of the Al Ula agreement, signed in January 2021.¹⁴ In Libya, for example, the UAE coordinates with a variety of regional and geopolitical actors, including Qatar, and engages with Libyan actors in both the east and west of the country.¹⁵ In the Horn of Africa, the UAE has quietly supported mediation efforts to resolve the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia.¹⁶ However, media reports claim the UAE, together with other external actors like Türkiye and Iran, exported drones to Addis Ababa that helped President Abiy, a major UAE ally, remain in power during the Ethiopian civil war.¹⁷ Divergences between Saudi Arabia and UAE in Yemen's war have escalated, despite official support from both sides for ending the conflict. Saudi Arabia and UAE-backed Yemeni groups have fought across Yemen—and tensions are rising in strategic regions like Hadramawt.¹⁸ In other flashpoints where the UAE has an outsized economic and security role, such as Sudan, Saudi Arabia is the Gulf Arab state leading mediation efforts while the UAE seems to be taking a backseat.¹⁹

As previously mentioned, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi quietly engaged with Tehran in 2019. At the height of Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, Mohamed bin Zayed reportedly dispatched his powerful brother, National Security Advisor Tahnoun bin Zayed (and now Abu Dhabi deputy ruler), to Iran for secret maritime security talks that would de-escalate tensions after a series of shipping attacks that summer that the U.S. attributed to Iran.²⁰ UAE-Iran dialogue continued throughout this period and accelerated in spring 2021, coinciding with the beginning of a Baghdad-facilitated Saudi-Iran dialogue process in April 2021.²¹ Tahnoun visited Tehran again in December 2021, where both Emirati and Iranian officials emphasized their improving ties and potential for increasing trade and investment between the two countries.²² The UAE is already Iran's most important trading partner in the region. Trade between the two countries is valued at around \$20 billion, and both sides aim to increase this to \$30 billion by 2025.²³ The UAE fully resumed diplomatic relations with Iran in August 2022,²⁴ several months before Saudi Arabia and Iran announced their resumption of diplomatic ties in March 2023.²⁵

The UAE led the regional charge to resume relations with Bashar Assad, which Saudi Arabia later followed. The UAE normalized relations with Assad back in 2018 and hosted him in 2022 for his first foreign visit since the start of the war.²⁶ Abu Dhabi hosted him for a second time in March 2023.²⁷ A senior Emirati official told Crisis Group in July 2022 that the UAE was focused on diplomacy and building regional economic connectivity with both Syria and Iran, despite the challenges that Western sanctions posed to greater economic ties.²⁸ It was not until early 2023 that Saudi Arabia publicly positioned itself at the helm of normalization efforts with Assad. In May, the Arab League voted in support of Syria's return to the Arab League,²⁹ Riyadh resumed diplomatic relations with Damascus,³⁰ and Assad attended the Arab League meeting in Riyadh.³¹

Abu Dhabi pursued normalization on multiple fronts. It decided to normalize relations with Israel in 2020³² and increase engagement with Türkiye in 2021.³³ Bahrain and Morocco both followed Abu Dhabi's lead and signed onto the Abraham Accords.³⁴ Following the normalization between the UAE and Israel, their economic ties have rapidly increased. The UAE became the first Arab country to sign a free trade agreement with Israel, and non-oil trade between the two reached \$2.5 billion in 2022.³⁵ Both sides aim to increase this to \$10 billion by 2030.³⁶ Other examples include rapprochement with Türkiye, which led to billions of dollars in investment agreements in 2021 and a trade agreement in 2023 to increase trade to \$40 billion over the next five years.³⁷

However, the UAE's normalization progressed slower in other key regional files, like the Gulf rift. The Emirates resisted ending the Qatar blockade and fully normalizing relations with its Gulf neighbor because Qatar had not met any of the blockading countries' demands and due to lingering suspicions about Qatar's relationship with Islamist groups across the region. Despite its frustration with the Saudi push to end the Gulf rift,ⁱⁱⁱ the UAE signed the Al Ula agreement in January 2021, ended the blockade, and initiated a gradual and cautious dialogue with Qatar that same year.³⁸ However, the two countries did not re-open their embassies until June 2023.³⁹ Distrust runs deep between the UAE and Qatar, especially over Qatar's ties with Islamist groups in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring protests, divergent foreign policies, and accusations of internal interference on both sides. Even though the UAE was not ready to fully normalize in 2021, high-level Qatar-UAE dialogue has moved gradually toward full implementation of the Al Ula agreement.

HOW SUSTAINABLE IS THIS REGIONAL RESET?

The UAE's push to improve ties with former regional foes has helped mitigate tensions in various flashpoints across the region. The regional consensus surrounding political rapprochement and regional economic cooperation represents a positive development over the last few years. However, there are two key challenges to sustaining this regional reset. First, some of the points of friction in the UAE's relations with Iran, Syria, Türkiye, and others have not been resolved. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved, with Israel continuing to annex Palestinian territory and showing no serious commitment to a two-state solution. Syria's Bashar Assad has offered no major concessions in exchange for returning to the Arab League, although some media reports contend an agreement was made with Assad to limit the Captagon trade, a drug trafficked primarily through Damascus that is increasingly present in Gulf countries.⁴⁰ While Iran may support conflict resolution efforts in Yemen in some ways, it is ultimately up to Yemeni actors^{iv} to resolve the conflict.⁴¹ Yemen's war may continue to pose security threats to Gulf Arab states, even with relatively more Iranian support for conflict resolution. Furthermore, even as Saudi-Iranian rapprochement moves ahead, Iran seized two oil tankers in the Gulf,⁴² highlighting that Iran and its tensions with the U.S. and Israel can still very much pose a threat to Gulf regional security.

Secondly, these political normalization efforts depend heavily on economic normalization. In certain cases, such as the UAE's relations with Israel and Türkiye, the economic dividends have already begun to manifest for both sides. However, for countries facing heavy sanctions, such as Syria and Iran, the picture is less clear. If Gulf Arab states cannot

iii. Saudi-UAE differences over ending the blockade became public with an October 2020 statement by Saudi Arabia that they were "committed to finding a solution." In November 2020, the UAE's ambassador to the U.S., Yousef Al Otaiba, argued that the issue would not be resolved "anytime soon." Soon after, the end of the blockade was announced.

iv. The U.S. special envoy on Yemen argues that despite positive signs of dialogue and de-escalation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the latter is still shipping weapons to Yemen after the signing of the Saudi-Iran deal.

increase trade and investment in Iran and Syria due to Western sanctions and weak investment environments, their normalization efforts may not lead to substantial improvements in these regional relations. At this point, it is not clear whether this regional reset will be able to hold in the longer term and, more importantly, whether it actually contributes to sustainable improvements in regional security.

CONCLUSION

Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE claim their efforts are about expanding their influence through diplomacy and economic cooperation, while also serving as a strategy to contain and counter Iranian influence in the region. These efforts could also be understood as litmus tests for Damascus, Tehran, and Ankara in particular, to determine whether greater engagement with these former foes leads to less tumultuous bilateral relationships. As one Emirati academic argued, the “old formula” of isolationism has not worked, and the UAE is trying a new approach.⁴³ The UAE seeks to determine if Tehran will moderate its regional power projection in exchange for improved political and economic relations with the Gulf Arab states.⁴⁴ Similarly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE want to see if diplomacy with Damascus can curb Iranian influence in Syria. However, it is unclear what the Saudi and Emirati red lines are in this new regional reset and under what conditions regional relations could deteriorate yet again. Moreover, the lack of political resolutions or roadmaps to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian crisis will continue to limit the regional benefits of some of these normalization efforts. In other words, it remains unclear how countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE plan to sustain some of these normalization drives, rendering them precarious at best.

ENDNOTES

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SECTION THREE

MULTIPOLARITY AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION



Leaders pose for a photo ahead of the 32nd Arab League Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on May 19, 2023. Palestinian Presidency / Handout / Anadolu Agency (Photo by Palestinian Presidency / Handout / ANADOLU AGENCY / Anadolu Agency via AFP)





RUSSIA IN THE MENA REGION AMID THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

When Vladimir Putin launched his “special military operation” in Ukraine a year ago, many experts and journalists concluded that this decision would inevitably have a fundamental impact on Russia’s foreign policy all over the world, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. For instance, there were widespread expectations that being distracted by the conflict with Ukraine, the Kremlin would not be able to sustain its military presence in Syria at previous levels. There were speculations that the special military operation would alienate some of Russia’s traditional friends and partners in the region and that Moscow will increasingly become a marginal player in Middle Eastern affairs, which was perceived by many geopolitical adversaries as a potential window of opportunity. However, it could also be seen as an additional factor of regional instability, raising the risks of new escalations of violence across the Middle East. For instance, if the Kremlin were to significantly curtail its military and economic assistance to Damascus, it could weaken the Syrian leadership and encourage the militant opposition to overthrow Bashar Assad.

Today, one year after the start of the Russian “special military operation,” one can conclude that its impact on the MENA region has not been as dramatic as many had anticipated. The Russia-Middle East policy has demonstrated considerable resilience, as has the regional system of international relations. Recent developments have been triggered more by long-term shifts in the balance of powers between the United States (U.S.) and China rather than the military confrontation in Europe. In mid-March 2023, Assad visited Moscow and received full confirmation from the Russian side that their bilateral relationship would not change, and that the Kremlin would continue to support Damascus militarily, economically, and diplomatically. Apparently, the Russian side did not push the Syrian leadership towards any fundamental modification in its approach to Türkiye or the Gulf states, although the Kremlin remains interested in a Syrian-Turkish rapprochement and Syria rejoining the League of Arab States.¹

The crisis in Eastern Europe has been less significant for the region than many other events happening simultaneously inside the Middle East, such as expanding the Abraham Accords, Israel’s deep political crisis, or the China-brokered Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. However, the crisis in Eastern Europe did have an impact on the food security of the MENA region and it also affected negotiations on oil exports within the OPEC+ format. Still, it would be an exaggeration to argue that since the start of the military conflict in Ukraine, the region would be irreversibly transformed. Most regional players demonstrated their intention to remain neutral in the crisis between Russia and the West, carefully avoiding taking sides or explicitly supporting anti-Russian economic and political sanctions.

In the updated version of the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, approved by President Putin on March 31, 2023, it is stated that Moscow intends to focus on building “the full-scale and trustful cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, providing comprehensive support for the Syrian Arab Republic, and deepening the multifaceted mutually beneficial partnerships with the Republic of Türkiye, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Arab Republic of Egypt...” It also states that Russia is committed to “establishing a sustainable comprehensive regional security and cooperation architecture in the Middle East and North

Africa, based on combining the capacities of all the states and interstate alliances of the regions, including the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Russia intends to actively cooperate with all the interested states and interstate associations in order to implement the [sic] Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region, viewing the implementation of this initiative as an important step toward a sustainable and comprehensive normalization of the situation in the Middle East."²

RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS

One of the most notable repercussions of the crisis in Eastern Europe has been the strengthening of the Russian-Iranian partnership. Over the last year, there has been a visible increase in the military-technical cooperation between Moscow and Tehran, which is clearly not limited to the alleged shipments of Shahed-series Iranian drones to Russia.³ In 2022, there was also a growth in the bilateral civilian trade and the resurrection of large-scale Eurasian North-South transportation corridors' projects, in which Iran is supposed to play a key role.⁴ In any case, Russian and Iranian bureaucrats now have shared interests in exchanging best practices in dealing with Western economic sanctions.⁵

However, it would be inaccurate to conclude that Moscow and Tehran have elevated their cooperation to the level of a strategic partnership. So far, Iran does not intend to formally recognize the change in the territorial status quo between Russia and Ukraine that took place since 2014. Russian and Iranian interests in Syria and Afghanistan, in addition to their approaches to Israel, are difficult to reconcile. Moreover, social interaction between the two nations remains low, and several controversial chapters in their bilateral relations (including multiple Russian-Iranian wars in the 18th and 19th centuries and the Soviet-British occupation of Iran during World War II) remain an obstacle for building mutual trust and affection.

RUSSIA AND ISRAEL

The military conflict with Ukraine has complicated Russia's relationship with Israel. The latter cannot remain indifferent to the emerging Russian-Iranian strategic partnership that threatens to challenge a very delicate balance of powers in Syria and perhaps in Lebanon as well. On the one hand, stronger ties between Moscow and Tehran could embolden Iran to be more assertive and aggressive in supporting its Shia clients in Syria and Lebanon, to the detriment of Israeli security. On the other hand, the Israeli leadership is under growing pressure from the West and a large part of the Israeli society to provide more support to Ukraine and to distance itself from Moscow.⁶ This could result in Russian-Israeli relations becoming more bumpy and less predictable in future.

Nonetheless, any deterioration of this relationship has its limitations, as Russia and Israel need each other—both in the MENA region and globally. The Russian-speaking diaspora in Israel is substantial, and it is affluent and politically active, even if it is not united and remains divided along several lines. Israel has always been a vital source of modern technologies for Russia. In addition, the Israeli leadership counts on Moscow to influence radical Palestinian groups as well as imploring Moscow's Arab partners to moderate their behavior.⁷ Both sides

have a lot to lose if they sever ties, but the exceptionally strong relationship between Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu along with their similar views on the modern world and the dynamics of international relations should allow them to mitigate political disagreements and to defuse potential crises.⁸

RUSSIA AND THE GULF

In the context of Russia's relations with major Arab countries of the Gulf, there is a remarkable degree of resilience, especially given continuous Western efforts to bring the Gulf on the "right side of history." While the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members may not fully endorse the official Russian narrative about Ukraine—as evidenced by their support for several UN General Assembly resolutions critical of Moscow,⁹ they do not subscribe to the U.S. or the EU anti-Russian sanctions. Furthermore, they are explicitly against expelling Moscow from important multilateral international organizations and forums. The Gulf countries continue to host high-level Russian delegations and sign new agreements on cooperation with their business partners from Russia.

There is a widespread perception in the Gulf and in the MENA region that the Western approach to Ukraine is a clear manifestation of double standards. Not only has the West completely failed to address numerous bloody conflicts outside the Euro-Atlantic space—for instance, in Yemen and in Palestine—but it should take direct responsibility for at least some of them, such as Iraq and Libya. The sharp contrast between Europe's treatment of Ukrainian refugees on the one hand and Syrian refugees on the other suggests that the "universal" Western human rights policies are often selective and biased. Additionally, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is often presented in black-and-white Manichean terms in the West, as part of an existential global clash between "good democracies" and "bad autocracies," and even as a crusade in defense of Western liberal values against barbaric Eastern despotism. Many states in the MENA region barely fit the Western "democratic" standards and were not invited to the two Summits for Democracy hosted by the Biden Administration in late 2021 and in the spring of 2023, raising questions about why these "disqualified" nations should stand by the principles of the club that they have not been admitted to.¹⁰

RUSSIA AND SYRIA

Russia's approach to Syria has not undergone any radical changes over the past year. In view of the costly military operation in Ukraine, the Kremlin has to save money wherever it can; this is likely to affect Russia's non-military assistance to Bashar Assad in a time when Damascus needs such assistance more than ever. This might result in Moscow being even less committed to a fundamental political transition in Syria than it has been before. However, Russia's military assistance and direct military engagement in Syria should be of less concern to the Kremlin since the costs of these efforts are almost negligible compared to its expenditure on its military operation in Ukraine.

It appears that Russian goals in Syria will be confined to maintaining the existing political status quo and to assisting Damascus in overcoming its isolation in the Arab world. This in-

cludes rejoining the League of Arab States and receiving investments and economic aid from wealthy Gulf countries. Specifically, Russia appears to be encouraging Saudi Arabia to take a more positive view on Bashar Assad and to engage in Syria economically.¹¹ Simultaneously, Russia will also continue to encourage Syria and Türkiye to reconcile their differences on Syrian Kurds and work towards restoring bilateral relations.¹²

Finally, the conflict with Ukraine hindered the Kremlin's ability to pursue even limited collaboration with the West in the MENA region, like in many other parts of the world. The evident lack of trust between Moscow and Western capitals might complicate many regional problems, including resurrecting the Iranian JCPOA, maritime security arrangements in the Gulf, deconflicting in Syria, and multilateral mechanisms for dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If Russia, alongside China, the U.S., and the EU, approaches the MENA security problems as a zero-sum game, this is likely to further complicate any progress in addressing security challenges in the MENA region. Unfortunately, it seems likely that the region will continue to be a venue for geopolitical great power competition in the years to come.

However, there are notable exceptions to this general trend. For instance, in 2022 and 2023, Russia and the West extended UN Security Council resolutions renewingⁱ cross-border aid operations into North-West Syria.¹³ They also reached consensus on a number of issues related to the post-earthquake economic relief for Syria. Some level of the U.S.-Russia military interaction in Syria seems inevitable as long as both nations maintain their military presence in the country. Russia, China, and the West could potentially agree on new UN-led measures to end the protracted civil war in Yemen. Moscow might take a kind view national elections taking place in Libya, as long as they happen in the near future.

MOVING FORWARD

The future of Russia's role in the MENA region will be defined by many factors, including the duration of the Russian-Western crisis and its ultimate outcome. Most regional actors look at this crisis not only as a new security challenge, but also as a new political opportunity to diversify their respective foreign policy investment portfolios. It explains why many MENA countries are reluctant to take sides in the Russia-West conflict and are not in a hurry to break their economic, political, and military ties to Moscow.

Furthermore, the first eighteen months of the conflict confirmed that the MENA international relations subsystem has some autonomy that makes it resistant to shocks and destabilizing impulses coming from other parts of the globe. This resilience should not be underestimated and any changes within the subsystem are likely to be gradual, coming mostly from inside the MENA region rather than from outside. Therefore, the Kremlin's opportunities and constraints will depend more on long-term economic, political, and security developments within the region than on any combination of external factors. In the end, Russia's influence in the Middle East will largely depend on the ability or inability of Moscow to make a tangible contribution to national modernization projects in years and decades to come.

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CHINA'S GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE: BRIDGING DIVIDES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The author would like to thank the team at the Middle Council on Global Affairs for the opportunity to share his insights.

INTRODUCTION

Beijing's recent mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which resulted in the trilateral joint statement on March 10, 2023, suggests that China is prepared to invest political, economic, and diplomatic capital in addressing Middle East security issues. As such, its new security concept (NSC) and peacebuilding efforts can have an impact in the region.¹

This chapter will elaborate on NSC as a major doctrine guiding China's policy toward the Middle East and will focus on its reconciliation efforts among major countries in the region in the last decade.

FROM NEW SECURITY CONCEPT TO GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE

China has proposed various initiatives since Xi Jinping became China's political leader. In 2014, at the fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, President Xi introduced the New Asian Security Concept, later simplified as the NSC.²

The NSC is based on four key principles: *first*, common security, which entails respecting and ensuring the security of each and every country; *second*, comprehensive security, which means upholding security in both traditional and non-traditional fields; *third*, cooperative security, which involves promoting the security of both individual countries and the region as a whole through dialogue and cooperation; and *fourth*, sustainable security, which focuses on both development and security for lasting stability.³

In 2022, President Xi Jinping announced the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which has NSC at its core, at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference,⁴ and the following year China formally issued the Global Security Initiative Concept Paper, which is a further interpretation of the GSI.⁵ GSI together with President Xi's Global Development Initiative (GDI), announced in 2021,⁶ and his Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), announced in 2023,⁷ form the three pillars of the overarching framework for China's foreign policy.

GSI reflects China's traditional philosophy on security issues, which feature holistic and dialectic approaches. China not only prioritizes its own security but also recognizes the importance of regional and global security. This approach stands in contrast to Western security paradigms that often prioritize one side's security over the other, resulting in security dilemmas.

These security dilemmas often arise from a deficit of trust or confidence between parties. In this context, one side may perceive the other as a security threat, creating a cycle of mistrust and conflict. For instance, Ukraine's perception of Russia as a security threat was a key motivation for their application for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership, while Russia considered Ukrainian efforts to pursue NATO involvement as a threat. This is the rationale behind various conflicts affecting not only Europe and the Middle East, but the world at large. GSI aims to overcome these dilemmas by promoting cooperative security through dialogue and negotiation, which serve not only as pathways to resolution but also as confidence-building measures.

PRACTICES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

While NSC and GSI were formally introduced in recent years, China has inadvertently been following these principles in the Middle East for an extended period.

This approach is characterized by partnerships rather than alliances, reflecting China's practice of the principles of the NSC. China has actively advocated for dialogue between conflicting parties in the Middle East while avoiding taking sides. For example, while criticizing Israel's militarized approach toward Palestinians, China has maintained friendly relations with both Palestine and Israel while facilitating dialogue between the two parties.⁸

China has also supported a negotiated solution to the Iran nuclear issue through a joint working group involving both the U.S. and Iran.⁹ Furthermore, China has encouraged détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia, maintaining partnerships with both countries.¹⁰ This mediation is a typical example of China's practice of NSC and GSI. The reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be considered part of the general trend of détente among major actors in the region in recent years, with the notable exception of the animosity between Iran and Israel. Regional actors have demonstrated their willingness to build a friendly neighborhood to maintain a favorable environment for domestic economic development.

China believes that its confidence-building measures have helped increase its prestige in the region, which in turn have facilitated China's mediation efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

CHINA'S GROWING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MIDDLE EAST

China has significantly increased its engagement with Middle Eastern countries in recent years, while redefining its relations with major regional actors. These include comprehensive strategic partnerships with Egypt (2014), Saudi Arabia (2016), Algeria (2014), UAE (2018), and Iran (2016); strategic partnerships with Qatar (2014), Morocco (2016), Djibouti (2017), Oman (2018), and Kuwait (2018); and a comprehensive partnership of innovation with Israel (2017).ⁱ China believes that alliances lead to confrontations between blocs, whereas partnerships are more inclusive.

In contrast to the U.S. alliance- and bloc-building approach that strives to safeguard its own geopolitical interests, China aims to maintain good relations with all the countries in the region, which it sees as a more constructive approach to tackle the security problems in the Middle East.

Consequently, in recent years, China has increased its engagement with major Middle Eastern countries, with its senior diplomat Wang Yi visiting Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Iran, UAE, Bahrain, and Oman in March 2021.¹¹ These visits were reciprocated in January 2022, despite strict COVID-19 travel restrictions.¹² In addition, Wang Yi and other high-level diplomats engaged with their Middle East counterparts in various multilateral platforms, such as meeting with foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries on the sidelines of the 2022 UN General Assembly.¹³

i. Strategic partnership refers to an important long-term relationship built on cooperation in at least one area, while comprehensive strategic partnership includes all areas such as security, politics, economy, and culture. The difference between both indicates a different level of political trust.

China's most important engagement with the region recently was President Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, where he attended summits involving Saudi Arabia and other GCC and Arab countries.¹⁴ President Xi also hosted Ebrahim Raisi, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in February 2023.¹⁵ These two moves not only illustrated the weight of China's economic relations with countries in the region, but also served to enhance the political relations and mutual confidence between China and the Gulf countries.

In conclusion, China considers the NSC and GSI as its guiding framework in its policy toward the Middle East and they have proven to be effective in their mediation efforts, including the Iran-Saudi Arabia détente. The growing willingness of regional actors to pursue a détente and China's preference for dialogue and maintaining good relations, position it as a major bridge-builder in the fragmented Middle East, especially if Beijing continues to invest political, economic, and diplomatic capital.

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RIVALRY AND REALIGNMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: HOW WILL THE UNITED STATES RESPOND?

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INTRODUCTION

The Saudi-Iranian diplomatic opening brokered by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in March 2023 illustrated a three-part shift in the geopolitics of the Middle East: growing disinclination of the United States (U.S.) to serve as regional hegemon, gravitation of U.S. allies towards hedging and balancing positions, and efforts by regional and extra-regional rivals to supplant residual U.S. power.¹ The U.S. retains significant interests and influence in the Middle East, and this is unlikely to change.² Yet the resulting regional system marks a sharp departure from the U.S.-dominated security architecture of the early 21st century. Multipolarity has become a reality in the Middle East—will Washington adapt?

ILLUSIONS AND DISILLUSION

Soviet-American rivalry dominated the geopolitics of the Middle East in the latter half of the 20th century, but with the end of the Cold War, Washington set about restructuring the region with an air of idealism and optimism. The Soviet collapse seemed to leave the door open for a peaceful, and consensual *Pax Americana* during the Clinton administration (1993–2001), with broader freedom and democracy, resolution of old conflicts, isolation of rogue regimes and economic integration under a U.S. lead.³ Serious and sustained negotiations on a two-state solution for the Israelis the Palestinians,⁴ humanitarian interventions in Africa, the Balkans, and elsewhere,⁵ and promoting liberalization⁶ in eastern Europe, China, and the Middle East formed the core of a transformative American foreign policy vision.

Following a rise in anti-American terrorism punctuated by the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration (2001–2009) pursued a more forceful transformation through a combination of military and economic power cast as a “freedom agenda.”⁷ The outcome was disappointing to Washington: prolonged warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, failure of talks for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, continued autocracy and violence across the region, and spiking anti-American sentiment.⁸ Public opinion in the U.S. increasingly turned against foreign policy activism, especially in the Middle East, constraining policy options.⁹

The Obama Administration (2009–2017) attempted to “pivot” U.S. foreign policy away from the Middle East and towards Asia by decreasing military presence and emphasizing the transformational potential of internal democratic change. Obama struggled to manage a series of calamities, though, as the Arab Spring yielded regional disappointment and disorder.¹⁰

The Trump Administration (2017–2021) reduced aspirations considerably and pursued a strategy focused on constraining Iran, enhancing the security of Israel and Gulf allies, and minimizing U.S. costs.¹¹ Trump’s goals represented a reset of U.S. ambition for and activities within the Middle East to more modest proportions, and succeeded on those terms.

President Biden (2021–present) has largely continued his predecessor’s policy of de-emphasis and management by exception.¹² The evolution of U.S. policy through Biden

represents at best an incomplete adaptation to multipolarity, on the whole: abjuring the failed path of ambitious unilateral solutions, but dodging hard choices, keeping allies at arms' length and rivals free to pursue agendas that threaten U.S. interests, values, and partners.¹³

The arc of U.S. policy in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War has thus been characterized by an idealistic and ambitious early phase, a hard-power interventionist middle phase, and the current period of retrenchment seeking to scale back costs and commitments. In a sense, this approach marks a return to the approach of the last Cold War president, George Herbert Walker Bush, which aimed to sustain U.S. primacy in a functioning regional order without either ceding the field to rivals or seeking to re-engineer it altogether.¹⁴ The suspicion that this amounts to “exiting the Middle East” has informed the actions of friends and foes alike.¹⁵

THE REGION ADAPTS

The region—friends, adversaries, and rivals alike—has adapted to the variable nature of U.S. commitment to the Mideast. It is abundantly clear that Washington lacks the appetite for renewed major diplomatic or military efforts, and is unlikely to transform, reward, nor decisively punish other actors in the region. Yet the U.S. retains interests, allies, and significant (though not decisive) economic and military leverage. This combination of a potent, but disinterested, former hegemon has prompted a variety of responses.

Opponents of U.S. power in the Middle East have responded to American retrenchment by ramping up their own military, economic, and diplomatic challenges to American primacy. Russia mounted military and paramilitary operations in Syria and Libya.¹⁶ China has become the top trade partner to the region and exercises increasing diplomatic clout, not necessarily to replicate or erase American influence but to prevent its unilateral exercise.¹⁷ Iran has deepened ties with great power allies China and Russia over the past two decades, survived on again/off again U.S. sanctions, and capitalized on the destruction of Sunni power in Iraq by constructing a regional power projection network spanning Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.¹⁸

Regional U.S. allies, seeing that cleaving closely to an engaged patron was no longer an option, responded by networking amongst themselves—and with external powers. Azerbaijan responded to Iran’s “forward defense” doctrine of using regional proxies to threaten rivals by deepening security cooperation with Israel and Türkiye.¹⁹ Despite receding prospects for a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem, a number of Arab countries normalized relations²⁰ and tightened security cooperation²¹ with Israel, with encouragement but not direction from America’s allies in the Middle East while listening politely to discussions of a Middle East Security Alliance (a sort of NATO for the Middle East) that would follow a U.S. lead but lessen U.S. costs. The idea stalled however,²² and those same allies have pursued careful hedging strategies to avoid antagonizing Russia, China, and Iran.²³ Türkiye, meanwhile, followed a period of regional military interventions with a diplomatic campaign to mend fences with neighbors,²⁴ as Ankara’s rivalry with Tehran in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere comes into sharper focus.²⁵

Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Israel, and other U.S. allies notably refrained from full alignment with the West on the war in Ukraine and other global issues, in part out of concern not to antagonize Russia.²⁶ War in Ukraine may have rejuvenated U.S. leadership within NATO and revived commitment to collective security by European partners, yet this sense of renewed vigor has not extended to the Middle East.²⁷ Europeans and Middle Easterners alike tend to see the U.S. as confused, inconsistent, and prone to serial strategic error.²⁸

NESTED MULTIPOLARITY

The *Pax Americana* briefly envisaged in the first decade after the Cold War never took root, but neither is there a sense of general disorder across the region. Wars, unrest, and rivalry plague a number of countries, but trade, diplomatic engagement, and ideological caution are present in increasing measures, too. It is possible, therefore, to characterize the current Middle East as a regional system working on the basis of nested multipolarity.

There is an external multipolarity because no single dominant and committed external player is present, nor even two as during the Cold War. The U.S., Europe, Russia, and China remain engaged and competitive in different ways and degrees. There is also an internal multipolarity because of the simultaneous rise of several military and economic power centers—Iran and its proxies, the Gulf, Israel, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan—exercising power in different ways, both to limit the power of rivals and to lessen dependence on any single external actor.

For the U.S., nested polarity requires adaptation of mindset, not just policy priorities. The region is not an orchestra in need of a conductor; it is a geopolitical marketplace that requires players to conduct their own savvy bargaining and ensure reliable transactions. Recognizing that allies will be aligned on some, but not all issues, working more collegially and less imperiously, and offering better transactional terms than other external powers will need to feature more prominently than coercive diplomacy and declarative disinterest.²⁹ If Washington can adjust to playing by these rules, it might remain *primus inter pares* (a first among equals) in the Middle East, if no longer the *dominans princeps* (leader).

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MULTIPOLARITY AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION: EUROPE'S EVOLVING ROLE IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's Ukraine invasion in February 2022 is leading Europe—both individual European countries, including the United Kingdom, and the European Union—to re-engage with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Toward the end of the 2010s and early 2020s, policymakers across Europe had sought to deprioritise the region driven, in part, by disillusionment. The Iraq war and the conflict-ridden aftermath of the 2010/11 Arab Uprisings, which had initially raised hopes of a regional democratic transformation, had led many to conclude that Europe could do little to affect positive change in MENA.¹

At the same time, there was a growing sense that too much attention had been paid to the region over the past two decades, and that, with the threat of terrorism posed by groups like Islamic State (IS) at least somewhat contained, it was time to refocus on other parts of the world. Most importantly, governments throughout Europe were eager to turn to the Indo-Pacific—increasingly regarded as the global economy's new centre of gravity and the region where the century's big strategic questions will be dealt with (particularly vis-à-vis China).² With Russia's war against Ukraine, European security has shot up the list of priorities of European policymakers, but the ensuing energy crisis has also forced them to once again look at MENA. The region's oil and gas producers—in the Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean, and North Africa—represent the best short- and medium-term alternative as Europe scrambles to replace the Russian fossil fuel supplies it had grown so dependent upon. Moreover, countries across the region are also natural partners in Europe's efforts to transition to renewable sources of energy, particularly with regard to solar and hydrogen production.³

ENERGY NEEDS DRIVE RENEWED FOCUS ON REGIONAL SECURITY

However, turning to MENA for energy means that Europe must also re-engage with the region's geopolitics. One of the key lessons learned from the war in Ukraine is that energy trade cannot be divorced from its political and security context and therefore requires a strategic approach. For European countries, individually and collectively, this means acknowledging the significant interests at stake in MENA.

Besides energy, this includes seizing economic opportunities, particularly in Gulf monarchies pursuing ambitious domestic development agendas, and confronting regional conflicts and instability that pose enduring security challenges. The experience of the 2010s, particularly the middle of the decade, has amply demonstrated how migrant and refugee flows from and through MENA, driven and facilitated by war and state collapse, can fundamentally affect politics and security across the European continent, to name but one example.⁴

By increasing imports of oil and gas from MENA producers and forging partnerships for renewable energy production (e.g., Germany's gas deal with Qatar,⁵ the EU's trilateral gas export agreement with Israel and Egypt,⁶ or Italian energy giant ENI's new projects launched in Algeria⁷ and Libya⁸), Europe is now acquiring an additional stake in the region's security. Algeria's increasing importance as a gas supplier for Europe means policymak-

ers in Brussels and throughout European capitals cannot avoid at last paying renewed attention to the longstanding Algerian-Moroccan dispute over the status of the Western Sahara.⁹ Similarly, the emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean as a key source of natural gas for Europe means there is renewed urgency for foreign and defence ministries across the continent to understand, and find ways to navigate, the complex set of overlapping fault lines that criss-cross that part of the region—from the decades-old tensions between Türkiye, Greece, and Cyprus, to the often-acrimonious relations between Türkiye and Egypt, to the hostile relations between Israel and Lebanon.¹⁰ Even the security of the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Suez Canal, always critically important for European maritime commerce, has gained a new dimension as more Gulf oil and gas destined for European markets is set to be shipped through these chokepoints.

RESPONDING TO THE CHANGING REGIONAL ORDER

As they seek to pursue and protect their interests in MENA, European governments must come to terms with the region's shifting geopolitics and regional order. This process of change—the outcome of which remains highly uncertain—is to a significant extent driven by MENA's evolving position in the landscape of global power dynamics. The United States (U.S.), the long-time indispensable security guarantor of many MENA countries and essential protector of the region's basic system of order, appears to be disengaging. It remains the dominant external security actor in the region, but Washington has downgraded MENA compared to other key priorities, most notably dealing with Russia in Europe and China in the Indo-Pacific.¹¹ At the same time, China has become the single-most important economic partner for many MENA countries, and political and security relations between Beijing and capitals across the region are also expanding.¹² There are serious questions about the extent to which Russia will be able to maintain its role in MENA as the war in Ukraine consumes its resources and bandwidth. Moscow has clearly made significant inroads in the region over the past decade that will continue to give it means to exert influence.¹³

All of this leaves most MENA governments in a delicate position. As the atmosphere between the U.S., China, and Russia grows increasingly competitive and/or downright hostile, they have to balance between protecting their security partnerships with the West, and their need to further develop ties with the East. They may be able—in theory—to choose sides between the U.S. and Russia, but not between the U.S. and China. While Moscow is a useful, but ultimately discretionary political and security partner for many MENA governments, their economic ties with Beijing are of existential importance. European governments must understand this dilemma, which their counterparts in the region find themselves in, and determine how to position themselves. They can simply be a part of the West, moving in lockstep with the U.S. or following its lead. Or do they attempt to chart their own course and develop more independent approaches to the region, both by themselves and/or in partnership with each other?

If it is to be the latter, if Europe wants to play its own role in the changing MENA, it has to come up with answers to some key issues set to determine the future of the regional order. Two stand out in particular: Iran's role as a regional power and potential nuclear

power; and the Abraham Accords and Arab-Israeli relations. For the past two decades, Europe's signature policy toward MENA, directly related to the regional order, was the pursuit of a negotiated deal with Iran that would include trade sanctions relief and political normalisation in exchange for Tehran constraining its nuclear ambitions. The logic was that such a deal—eventually realised with the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015—would be key to unlocking many other problems in the region, including the fractious relations between Iran and its Arab neighbours, and would avoid the prospect of an Israeli and/or U.S. war to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons. Alas, as of mid-2023, the JCPOA appears dead;¹⁴ the Iranian regime's crackdown on women-led protests in late 2022 has attracted international outrage;¹⁵ and Russian deployment of Iranian drones in Ukraine has led to Iran appearing as a more direct threat to European security.¹⁶ Across European capitals there is a growing conviction that a new approach to Iran is needed, even as its exact shape remains uncertain.

The Abraham Accords, meanwhile, and the wider reshaping of, in particular, relations between Israel and the Gulf monarchies, have thus far taken shape without much of a European role or input (if any at all). At the time, many in Brussels, Berlin, Paris, London, and elsewhere dismissed the August 2020 normalisation agreements between Israel and Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as little more than a likely transient gimmick conjured up by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump. Almost three years later, it is evident the Abraham Accords are more than that. There is still a long way to go toward more comprehensive Arab-Israeli normalisation, and the hard-line Israeli government elected in late 2022 could well bring major setbacks. But the tectonic plates of the MENA regional order are clearly shifting, and Europe can either try to play a role in, and find ways to influence, this process, or it will be relegated to reactionary outcomes. The future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and what is left of the two-state-solution—a mainstay in European-MENA policy for decades—looms particularly large in this context.¹⁷

FUTURE OF EUROPE'S ROLE IN MENA: NO ALTERNATIVES TO A STRATEGIC APPROACH

As things stand, in mid-2023, there are more questions than answers regarding Europe's future place and role in the MENA. The EU's policy paper outlining plans for "A Strategic Partnership with the Gulf,"¹⁸ published in May 2022, signalled a new European attempt to develop a more strategic approach—combining political, economic, security, and geo-strategic components—to at least six Gulf Arab monarchies. Similar work must continue and extend to the rest of the region—including at the EU level and with individual countries, and in bilateral or mini-lateral formats. Ultimately, Europe cannot ignore MENA or afford to be absent from major debates and developments shaping the region's future. Even as governments across the continent want to focus on, or 'tilt' toward the Indo-Pacific,ⁱ they cannot lose sight of their southern neighbourhood. After all, geography dictates almost all routes from Europe to the Indo-Pacific go through MENA.

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SECTION FOUR BATTLEGROUND



A member of the Libyan National Army walks through a heavily damaged street in Benghazi's central Akhribish district on July 19, 2017. (Photo by Abdullah DOMA / AFP)





SYRIA'S REGIONAL REHABILITATION: BETWEEN CONSENSUS AND COMPETITION

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, Syria has been a battleground for regional competition, reflecting broader tensions and alignments among Middle East and North Africa (MENA) powers. The involvement of international actors, coupled with the divergent interests between Türkiye, the Gulf monarchies, and Iran, has led to a deadlock where victory for any side has seemed elusive. Indeed, these rivalries have shaped the Syrian landscape for over a decade, with various actors supporting different factions, at times even within the same camp.

The Russian intervention in September 2015 considerably changed the regional actors' calculus in the Syrian conflict.¹ The Gulf states' previous policies of supporting the rebel groups militarily have come to a halt, and they gradually abandoned the Syrian political opposition. By 2022, priorities have shifted as Syria's prominence on the regional agenda has diminished.

This evolving context has given rise to a significant region-wide trend of de-escalation, driven by a combination of factors, including conflict fatigue, the COVID-19 pandemic, economic security concerns, and a perception of declining U.S. engagement in the Middle East. The inconsistent nature of U.S. support has further entrenched this perception. This shift towards direct Middle East regional conflict management is unprecedented and reflects a genuine drive towards stability.

Following an agreement between Russia and Türkiye in March 2020, regional de-escalation has manifested itself in a fragile but long-lasting truce in Syria.² While Iran was not directly involved in the agreement, it has respected this arrangement and avoided changing the conflict dynamics. Similarly, the United States (U.S.) has continued to support the Syrian Democratic Forces and has consequently fended off Turkish attempts to reshape the territorial landscape, thereby effectively freezing the conflict.

On the political front, former staunch opponents of the Syrian regime have either initiated contact with Bashar Assad or openly considered the possibility of restoring bilateral relations with Damascus. Syria's readmission to the Arab League after a 12-year suspension is a symbolic victory for Assad and a recognition of the end of the conflict.³ The Syrian regime's rehabilitation does not necessarily reflect a regional consensus; reconciliation with Assad appears more as a product of bilateral and transactional deals rather than a unified stance or agreement. Several Arab states concluded that normalization with Damascus would mitigate the conflict's destabilizing ramifications, including drug trafficking, refugee crises, and weakened border security. Others were motivated by the possibility of balancing Iran's or Türkiye's influence in the country.

Indeed, despite a shared interest in de-escalation and stability, Türkiye, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Saudi Arabia remain divided on their desired outcomes and expectations. The transactional nature of these agreements also casts serious doubts on their viability. After 12 years without a solution, the regional actors' pursuit of de-escalation is a critical development. Still, the underlying complexities and divisions underscore that the road to peace and stability in Syria remains uncertain and challenging.

DIFFERENT DRIVERS, DIFFERENT OUTCOMES

Syria's rapprochement with the Middle East is rapidly gaining traction following the Assad regime's outreach to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Traditional rivalries and alignments, such as *Iran vs. Saudi Arabia*, are changing. The role and threat of extremist groups like Islamic State (IS) in Syria have been seemingly reduced.⁴ The countries' motivations to reconcile with Assad are multifaceted and complex, reflecting a mix of strategic, economic, and political considerations. The shifting dynamics in the region have led to a nuanced approach by various countries, each with its unique set of priorities and concerns.

In recent years, the UAE, and albeit at a slower pace, Saudi Arabia, have undergone significant foreign policy shifts, moving from confrontational stances to a reconciliatory approach. This realignment has seen both countries normalize relations with major regional players, including Iran, Türkiye, Qatar, and Syria. The failure of confrontational policies toward Iran, in particular, has led to a change in dealing with Assad. Whether in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi, de-escalation vis-à-vis Tehran is seen as an opportunity to address their security concerns directly rather than outsourcing.

In Syria, this de-escalation has manifested thus far in two forms: re-engagement with the state and soft containment of Iran's influence over Damascus. The Syrian regime's survival after a decade of bloody conflict has pushed them both to reintegrate Assad into the new regional order to ensure regional cooperation and stability and to offer him credible alternatives to Iran's assistance and support.

Abu Dhabi's normalization with Damascus is not necessarily conditioned by its détente with Tehran. Re-engagement with Syria provides the UAE with a range of other opportunities, such as postulating as an international mediator or countering Türkiye's influence over the Syrian opposition.⁵ Abu Dhabi, followed by Manama, was the first Gulf capital to resume diplomatic relations with Damascus in 2018.⁶ The significant rapprochement between the UAE and the Syrian regime, including Assad's visit,⁷ underscores the UAE's active promotion of normalization.

Conversely, the sequence of the Iran-Saudi rapprochement and reconciliation with Assad might indicate a connection between them.⁸ Normalizing ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran could have triggered or accelerated the same process with Syria. The Iranian-Saudi deal probably included a reduction of tension and flashpoints. However, unlike in Yemen, where Tehran and Riyadh are vital actors, the Saudi role in the Syrian conflict was considerably diminished after the Russian intervention was primarily contained in hosting the opposition's Syrian Negotiation Committee only.⁹ The possibility of a Saudi disengagement in Syria in exchange for a reciprocal Iranian de-escalation in Yemen appears remote or at least of less significance.

Instead, Riyadh could have been motivated by other reasons to reconcile with Damascus swiftly, and the timing and sequence of events were merely coincidental. Earlier this year, Saudi Arabia used its influence to persuade other Arab states not to obstruct Syria's re-admission to the Arab League. Only Riyadh's change in position made Syria's return pos-

sible.¹⁰ The Jeddah meeting was the first full-house Arab League Summit since 2012 and underscored Mohammed bin Salman's aspiration to position himself as the natural leader of the new regional order. Other reasons could include encouraging the Syrian regime's cooperation in countering drug smuggling or alleviating the burden of refugees in the region by facilitating their return. Nonetheless, normalization yielded minimal substantial developments, suggesting that symbolic gestures have not translated into a complete reset of relations.¹¹

Similarly, several Arab states like Bahrain, Jordan, and Tunisia have been moving away from their anti-Assad positions, restoring diplomatic relations with Damascus. Meanwhile, countries like Iraq, Algeria, and Oman never backed the Syrian opposition and have welcomed this trend. Noteworthy among these are the roles of Jordan and Oman.ⁱ

Jordan's policy towards Syria has been driven by border security and the threat of Islamist militancy. While initially supporting rebels, Jordan's primary objective was to ensure southern Syria did not become a hotbed for extremism. Its facilitation of talks between rebel factions and Moscow, coupled with its decision to maintain diplomatic ties with Syria, reflects a pragmatic approach driven by regional security imperatives.¹² Jordan's normalization with Syria in October 2021, with a focus on cross-border trade and security coordination, further illustrates this pragmatic approach.¹³

More importantly, Amman has demonstrated a solid will to mediate and manage the regional rehabilitation of Damascus. Preluding Syria's readmission to the Arab League, Jordan has proposed a joint Arab peace plan to end its isolation.¹⁴ The plan includes a roadmap that addresses the humanitarian, security, and political repercussions of the conflict and a gradual reciprocal reintegration of Syria in the political and economic security architecture of the MENA region. Amman has not only been promoting this strategy among Arab states, but has also reached out to the U.S., European Union (EU), and Türkiye.¹⁵

Likewise, Oman harbors a keen interest in assuming a mediating role, both on the regional and international level. At the height of the Syrian conflict, Oman was the only Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member that did not take significant diplomatic action against Damascus.¹⁶ Instead, Muscat used its neutral stance to encourage a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. Oman's involvement in Syria is supported by its relationships with the U.S., Russia, Iran, and the UAE, positioning itself as a balancing actor in the region.

Another state that showed interest in playing a mediator role is Egypt, although the extent of its diplomatic maneuvering has fallen short of realizing this potential.¹⁷ Initially in opposition to the Syrian regime under Mohammed Morsi's presidency, Egypt's stance evolved following Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi's coup. In 2013, Cairo resumed consular relations with Damascus but did not fully normalize relations.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Egypt prioritizes the stability of the Syrian regime and views the opposition as a proxy for Türkiye.¹⁹ Egypt's reinstatement of ties completes the "Arab encirclement," marking an official renewal of relations.

Conversely, Qatar, Kuwait, and Morocco have refrained from normalizing relations with Assad's government, maintaining that Damascus has not taken any action to merit rehabilita-

i. Bahrain and the UAE re-established diplomatic ties with Syria in December 2018. Jordan followed suit in 2021, while Egypt was the first to resume their relations in 2013. Kuwait, Qatar, Morocco, and Libya have thus far shown no interests in normalizing their relations with Damascus. Morocco has long-standing grievances with Syria for its support of the Polisario Front, while Haftar has maintained an excellent relationship with the Syrian regime, which supported him with mercenaries in his war against the Libyan government. Algeria, Lebanon, Oman, Sudan, and Iraq never broke their ties with Syria.

tion. Qatar's hardline anti-Assad stance is framed as being on the side of the Arab people and social justice.²⁰ While neither Qatar nor Kuwait obstructed Syria's return to the Arab League, there is good reason to believe that Doha will be the last Arab capital to treat Syria's government as legitimate.²¹ Several factors could explain Qatar's entrenched position, among them the lack of incentives and benefits of restoring ties with the Syrian regime, the sheikhdom's commitment to the Syrian people, and the lack of evidence that Assad's rehabilitation would alleviate their suffering.

As for non-Arab regional powers, Türkiye has been gradually moving towards normalizing relations with Assad since 2021. On August 12, 2022, in a regular press briefing, the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu offhandedly noted a short conversation he shared with the Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad during a Non-Aligned Movement gathering in October 2021. Shortly after, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan clarified that Türkiye has no territorial ambitions in Syria and emphasized the importance of sustained communication between the two nations.²² This manifestation of goodwill gained momentum in December 2022, with high-ranking officials from both countries meeting in Moscow. Talks with officials from Türkiye and the Assad regime were hosted by Moscow to discuss rebuilding relations.²³

At first glance, Ankara's recent peace-making gestures toward Damascus might seem aligned with its broader regional de-escalation efforts. Yet, the Syrian situation is distinct and more complex. Türkiye not only holds significant territories in northern Syria but is also deeply involved in developmental activities there, such as education, health-care, and security. However, Ankara's primary concern is the perceived threat from the Kurdish-led administration in northeastern Syria. This shift in Türkiye's stance towards Syria is primarily influenced by the prominent Kurdish presence in the north and the unresolved issue of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, both pivotal topics in Turkish domestic politics. Nevertheless, two significant developments have influenced the reconciliation process from the Syrian perspective: the twin earthquakes that hit Türkiye and northwestern Syria in February, and the May 2023 Turkish elections, which have lessened the urgency for tangible progress.²⁴

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The Arab push to normalize with Assad is driven by a desire to mitigate tensions and reduce the risk of regional conflicts disrupting their socio-economic agendas. Nevertheless, numerous technical challenges are preventing the establishment of a sustainable peace and resolution in Syria. The shifts in regional politics could be seen as deliberate recalibrations aimed at conflict management and reducing economic vulnerability. However, they are not solutions to entrenched mistrust or tensions. Without deliberate international support, these new ties can quickly unravel.

Indeed, Assad's regime faces challenges, particularly from the West. His attempts to leverage the earthquake to advocate for lifting Western sanctions have been met with resistance.²⁵ The U.S. and EU remain steadfast in withholding reconstruction funds until a political solution is found in line with United Nation Security Council Resolution 2254.²⁶

Even allies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE are cautious, finding indirect ways to support Damascus financially but shying away from overtly funding reconstruction in contravention of Western sanctions. For instance, following the February earthquake, both countries sent humanitarian aid to regime-held areas despite being aware of Damascus's tendency to exploit such assistance for its own survival.²⁷

Western-imposed sanctions, especially Washington's Caesar Act,²⁸ are currently the biggest obstacle to investments by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Arab countries. The Gulf is left with no viable options in Syria, and while regional proposals will continue to float, they battle with the constraints of an inflexible Damascus, limited resources for re-engagement, and the deterring impact of sanctions.

Moreover, when the U.S. administration did not produce a strong objection, Congress has often filled the vacuum, passing legislation to induce White House action on Syria, such as The Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act of 2023.²⁹ Similarly, and despite the wish of certain members, the EU has maintained a firm stance against normalization with the Syrian regime. This was particularly evident in its response to the devastating earthquake, where the delivery of aid to regime-held areas proved difficult and challenging.³⁰

Equally, Assad's strategic use of the Captagon drug trade and the refugee crisis further complicates the picture. While the Arab League has announced cooperation with Syria to tackle drug smuggling,³¹ the regime's dependence on this lucrative trade makes a genuine crackdown unlikely. Similarly, Assad's appeal for reconstruction funds to facilitate refugee return is undermined by Syrians' unwillingness to leave their host countries without guarantees for their security or livelihoods.

The Syrian case also raises critical questions about accountability and justice. Amid Syrian activists' emphasis on war crime trials through national courts in European countries as an alternative route to justice, their rulings might prevent Assad's complete international rehabilitation and set a vital precedent.

Syria's complex scene demands a nuanced understanding and a coordinated international response to ensure stability, justice, and a sustainable path forward for Syrians and the region. Regional powers, mainly the Gulf countries, have complained about the absence of U.S. and EU leadership and the need for an international vision for Syria's future. However, the ever-shifting regional landscape makes it difficult to imagine such an initiative emerging without a clear consensus.

CONCLUSION

The Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape is marked by a fluidity that reflects the evolving dynamics between Arab states and Syria. This rapprochement, driven by a mix of pragmatism and shifting regional priorities, manifests a united front and a complex interplay of regional dynamics, geopolitical rivalries, and diverse interests and strategies. The once united opposition to Assad has transformed into a more pragmatic approach, recognizing the realities on the ground and the necessity to engage with the Syrian regime. Nonetheless, the reality is more complex.

Saudi Arabia's shift, in particular, emphasizes the evolving nature of regional politics, while the UAE's re-engagement illustrates efforts to counter non-Arab influences. The evolving stances of Türkiye and Jordan add complexity to this picture, underscoring the multifaceted nature of Middle Eastern politics where past hostilities yield new alignments.

Nevertheless, a solution that overlooks the underlying causes of the conflict in Syria is doomed to fail. Without realistic solutions backed by substantial support and a vision for sustainable peace, the region will remain vulnerable to a new wave of violence when the next opportunity arises. If such a scenario unfolds, the ensuing chaos could be too costly for the region to contain within Syria's borders, highlighting the urgent need for a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to peace and stability.

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IRAQ BENEFITTING FROM REGIONAL RESET

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INTRODUCTION

Various attempts at regional reconciliation and rapprochement in the Middle East, as well as the international community's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine, have largely prevented Iraq from becoming a battleground for other countries to settle their disputes in the past year. Although Iraq is not a driving force of the current regional reset in the Middle East, it has benefitted the most from it. A potential reset of regional relations, particularly between Iraq's most critical neighbors, Iran and Saudi Arabia, can prevent the country from being used as a battleground for regional and international rivalries. Now that the Middle East has entered a post-Arab Spring phase, regional actors are not only altering their approach to Iraq but also to one another, recognizing the multipolar nature of the regional order and emphasizing economic cooperation. Notable examples include the recent normalization discussions between Saudi Arabia and Iran,¹ the agreements between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain with Israel, and diplomatic efforts between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, as well as Türkiye and Egypt.² By forging closer trade, economic, and political ties with its powerful neighbors and various regional actors, Iraq can reap significant benefits.

Iraq is pursuing regional economic, political, and security integration and cooperation, which is crucial given its rapid population growth and classification as the fifth-most vulnerable country to climate change worldwide.³ In the past four years, Iraq has undertaken an unprecedented diplomatic effort to integrate itself into the regional political and economic landscape and position itself as a mediator. After the war against the Islamic State (IS), there has been a growing trend among Iraqi politicians and officials to support a balanced foreign policy, which can be attributed to two factors: the need to garner regional support in the fight against IS, and the military success against the group, which boosted Iraqi officials' confidence. In 2019, the establishment of an economic and geopolitical cooperation mechanism between Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq was announced.⁴ However, it was not until Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's leadership in 2020 that Iraq was able to make tangible progress towards achieving this objective.

The Iraqi government has organized conferences focused on the wider region, including the tripartite summit in Baghdad between Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt on June 26, 2021, and the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership on August 28 of the same year. These events took place amidst significant security and political crises, including the US-Iranian confrontation on Iraqi soil and infighting among Shia powers. These crises have limited Baghdad's ability to achieve its objectives. Nevertheless, the events have contributed to Iraq's efforts to establish a new regional identity as a facilitator for bringing parties together.

Under the current government of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, formed in October 2022, Baghdad is expected to persist in its endeavor to play a greater regional role. Another Baghdad Conference is anticipated for October of this year, with a primary focus on economic cooperation. While the attendees have not yet been confirmed, the conference is expected to target influential regional neighbors and powers, including Türkiye, Iran, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.⁵ As part of this approach, al-Sudani extended a warm welcome to Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, on June 15, 2023, during which the Qatari Emir pledged a \$5 billion investment in Iraq.⁶ Three days prior to this, al-Sudani co-chaired the second round

of the joint Egyptian-Iraqi cooperation committee in Cairo. As a tangible demonstration of the practical implementation of these visits, the Iraqi and Egyptian governments signed 11 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) covering collaboration in various sectors including diplomacy, finance, tourism, and administrative development.⁷

REGIONAL COOPERATION AS A FORM OF SOVEREIGNTY ENHANCER

Since taking office, al-Sudani has outlined his government's regional policy, which aims to establish a more prominent role for Iraq in the region. This involves two main measures: providing a platform for regional powers to engage in dialogue, and balancing Iraq's relationships with the United States (U.S.) and Iran, as well as Iran and the Arab states.⁸ However, as he is backed by the predominantly Shia Coordination Framework, which includes two former prime ministers and pro-Iranian parties, his approach should not be perceived as biased towards the Arab states. This could potentially lead to confrontations with Iranian-aligned militias, as was the case in the previous government.

The pursuit of a more prominent regional role for Iraq and the objective of serving as a bridge builder between regional powers has been a consistent goal of the last four Iraqi governments. These include the governments of Haider al-Abadi (2014–2018), Adel Abdul-Mahdi (2018–2019), Mustafa al-Kadhimi (2020–2022), and al-Sudani (2022–present). This aspiration reached its peak with the formation of al-Kadhimi's government in May 2020. Iraq's decision-makers acknowledge the importance of a balanced regional role to ensure Iraq's sovereignty and stability. Iraq has been a battleground for various regional and international rivalries, such as those between the U.S. and Iran, Iran and Türkiye, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and other regional powers. These rivalries have also led to the formation and strengthening of local proxies and clients that operate independently of the government,⁹ leading to the fragmentation of sovereignty and perpetuating the lack of complete control over the use of violence. For instance, Iran's proxies in Iraq have the capabilities to use its territory and state resources to threaten other neighbors. In this context, regional cooperation is vital for both external and domestic sovereignty.

In addition to these political objectives, Iraq's efforts towards regional integration are also driven by the need for an improved economic performance to stabilize the country and address the protests and instability that have persisted since October 2019. To this end, the government is emphasizing increased economic cooperation with regional powers in its current diplomatic initiatives. Furthermore, the rise in oil prices since the onset of the Ukraine conflict has boosted Iraq's oil revenues from \$75.5 billion in 2021 to \$115 billion in 2022, providing additional economic advantages.¹⁰ With these economic and political advantages, the first nine months of al-Sudani's government have arguably been Iraq's most stable period since 2003.

THE DECLINE OF EXTERNAL LEVERAGE

The influence of external actors, such as the U.S., Türkiye, and Arab countries, on Iraq and its political process has been diminishing. The internal power dynamics within Iraq have become increasingly intricate and amorphous, with no single entity or coalition capable of monop-

lizing the country's decision-making processes and determining its foreign policy priorities. Consequently, external actors face significant challenges in maintaining their influence over Iraq. One example is the diminishing relevance of Sunni Arab politicians, who were backed by Türkiye following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, as they are no longer significant players in Iraq's political landscape.ⁱ In contrast to the major Shia and Kurdish powers, Sunni parties lack armed organizations and shadow administrations in their regions to safeguard their interests and power in the event of a poor election performance. Therefore, sustaining engagement with them requires a continual evaluation of power dynamics and the evolving foundations of Sunni parties.

Iran has managed to preserve and even augment its sway in Iraq, unlike the U.S. and other regional actors. This was primarily accomplished by establishing a network of proxies and allied groups within the Iraqi parliament, governments, and armed factions on the ground. Iran has institutionalized its influence within the Iraqi state to the extent that it would be challenging for any Iraqi prime minister to take an anti-Iranian stance without risking significant instability for their government.¹¹ Despite this, Iran is aware that public demands on the Iraqi government to achieve more are escalating, and that Iraq also needs to bolster its economic integration and cultivate favorable trade and economic ties with Arab and other neighboring nations. For the time being, pro-Iranian groups in Iraq are not opposing al-Sudani's approach towards Arab countries like the UAE, Egypt, and Jordan, indicating that Iran has approved and comprehended this approach.¹²

IRAQ'S MEDIATION EFFORTS: WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE REGION

The current Iraqi government possesses two primary advantages over its predecessor that enable Iraq to play a more active role in the region and benefit from regional reconciliations. First, during al-Kadhimi's administration, there were significant disputes among Shia forces concerning al-Kadhimi's strategy for engaging with Arab states and integrating into regional politics. Some forces aligned with Iran asserted that al-Kadhimi's approach favored the Saudis and other Arab states opposing Iran, such as the UAE.¹³ However, the current Prime Minister al-Sudani has earned the approval of these Shia forces. The Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, two leading pro-Iranian Shia power centers in Iraq, have embraced al-Sudani's strategy as "mature" and "pragmatic."¹⁴ This marks a shift from less than a year ago when they publicly opposed al-Kadhimi's attempts to accomplish the same goal.

When asked about Iraq's potential role in mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran, al-Sudani stated that Iraq's objective is not to position itself as a mediator but rather to create initiatives that foster dialogue between these two regional rivals.¹⁵ Iraq has a distinct advantage compared to other Arab countries regarding the Iran-Saudi Arabia relations and rivalry. For instance, Qatar is unable to undertake this role due to its own disputes with Saudi Arabia, while Oman is perceived as being too aligned with the Saudis, as viewed from Iran's perspective.¹⁶

Iraq's majority Arab and Shia demographic has aided the country in this regard. As a result, Iraqi mediation has been successful in bringing the two parties together for several rounds of bilateral talks in Baghdad,¹⁷ paving the way for normalized relations. Prime Minister Al-Kad-

i. Tariq al-Hashimi and Osama al-Nujayfi are the chiefs among these politicians.

himi's background as the former head of Iraq's National Intelligence Service played a crucial role in establishing a safe space for these talks to occur. China's involvement in the process came later, facilitating the signing ceremony and potentially hosting technical talks due to its historically balanced relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ However, the direct division of labor between China and Iraq in this regard remains unconfirmed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Iraq's objective of being a regional mediator has become a consistent element of Iraqi politics, and its recent diplomatic initiatives have had a favorable symbolic impact on the country's regional reputation. The current Iraqi government intends to transcend mere symbolism and foster increased economic cooperation with neighboring countries. However, Iraq's regional influence remains contingent on the actions of regional powers, which have forged various patron-client connections with different entities within Iraq. Any deterioration in their relations could substantially disrupt Iraq, erode its sovereignty, and limit its potential regional impact, as has occurred frequently over the last two decades.

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LIBYA: THE CANARY OF MENA'S NORMALIZATION

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The author would like to thank Nejla Ben Mimoune for her invaluable assistance in the editing process.

INTRODUCTION

Libya served as the central battleground for the intra-regional rivalries that defined the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the 2010s. Despite the problems it posed to all the interfering parties, Libya's strategic assets have an enduring appeal, ensuring that all those who intervened never truly left, but rather just continuously reshaped their interventions. Today, Libya remains the battleground of a cold conflict between competing powers who claim to be normalizing their relations. As such, Libya's contested transition symbolizes the flaws of the current normalization process and highlights the fault lines where it might eventually fracture. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and its geopolitical and economic ramifications also exacerbated key variables of the Libyan conflict, such as energy demand, Western diplomatic bandwidth, hostility to Russia, and price spikes of essential goods. These changing variables in turn increased the battle for Libya, risking a return to a state of chaotic disorder and potentially, dragging the rest of the region with it.

A SPOIL OF GEOPOLITICAL WAR

Libya emerged as a prized target in the regional battle that was catalyzed by the 2011 uprisings. At the heart of North Africa, with almost 2,000 kilometers of coastline on the central Mediterranean and representing a gateway to the rest of the continent, Libya's geography is highly strategic for powers looking to increase their influence in the Mediterranean or Africa. Moreover, with the largest proven oil reserves in Africa, and a treasure in foreign exchange reserves (in 2011),¹ there was a strong economic attraction. Libya was fragile after a complex civil war to remove long-term dictator Muammar Gadhafi, and its weak political class led an ill-defined transition following the war, making it vulnerable to intervention.

Interventions in Libya—attempts to co-opt Libya's transition and ruling class to serve the interests of the intervening nation—were often a precursor to conflicts that would erupt regionally or dynamics that would continue to evolve across the broader region. For example, the early years of Libya's transition was defined by an intra-Gulf competition between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar,² years before the rivalry devolved into the infamous Qatar blockade of 2017. The two small yet ambitious and resource-rich states competed antagonistically to increase their influence across the MENA region following the 2011 uprisings. While Doha hosted former political oppositions, Abu Dhabi instead attempted to empower institutional remnants of former regimes. In Libya, as elsewhere, neither really succeeded, and combined, they aggravated existing drivers of instability.³

The rise of Libya's renegade general Khalifa Haftar in 2014 showcased an Emirati-led alliance with Egypt, and then France, to project power and increase their influence across the region, an evolution of their earlier rivalry with Qatar. Egypt's newly empowered military found an ideological ally in the UAE as it sought to cultivate a new military institution in Libya, which could replicate their putsch. Meanwhile, Paris was seduced by the anti-Islamist rhetoric of Abu Dhabi, Cairo, and Haftar himself, and backed the would-be strongman to expand their own influence in Libya whilst strengthening what they considered to be strategic and potentially lucrative regional alliances with the UAE and Egypt. Russia's role in printing banknotes for Haftar's enterprise, and the deployment of the Wagner Group signified a more interventionist

foreign policy that leaned heavily on private military contractors.⁴ Finally, the antagonisms between Türkiye, Egypt, and the UAE, felt in Syria, northern Iraq, and the eastern Mediterranean was inflamed by the Turkish military intervention to defend Libya's capital Tripoli from Haftar's 2019 assault. The decisive role of Turkish drones in their intervention in Libya was a seminal moment and the tactics trialed around Tripoli would evolve through conflicts in, for example, Syria. Even in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine conflicts Turkish drones played a decisive role.⁵

Accordingly, every iteration of the ratcheting regional battle is etched into the history of Libya's transition. Similarly, the stalemate following Haftar's defeat in 2020 can be considered the start of the regional normalization process. Despite the collapse of Haftar's forces, Russia kept Libya divided down the middle at the city of Sirte, while Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi declared it a red line, threatening to send troops should the Turkish-backed Libyan government forces try to reclaim it.⁶ This regional power balance between Russia and Türkiye, the potential escalation by Egypt, and Haftar's glaring failure, all contributed to a collective re-think. The election of Joe Biden as president of the United States (U.S.) suggested a changing geopolitical environment that would be less tolerant of destructive adventurism.

NORMALIZATION, OR WAR BY OTHER MEANS

Since then, the once-competing regional powers have begun to "normalize" their relations by repairing them, reducing violent competition, and looking for shared opportunities. Different aspects of this normalization are again reflected in Libya's attempts to transition through elections following Haftar's war on Tripoli. The UAE and Türkiye continue to use Libya as a platform, consolidating their holdings, looking to the other's sphere, and exploring projects of mutual benefit. Egypt and Türkiye remain in a cold war, however, where Libyan issues—primarily Cairo's desire to control Tripoli and the perceived threat from Turkish consolidation—are partially obstructing their normalization.

Since the end of the war, Türkiye has capitalized on its victory by establishing deep economic⁷ and security⁸ ties with Libya's new government led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, which was formed in February 2021 to lead the country to elections but has instead been diverted to more profitable pursuits. Controversially, in October 2022, Türkiye entered into broad memorandums of understanding with Dbeibah's government⁹ designed to facilitate Turkish exploration for offshore gas in waters disputed between Greece and Libya as part of its eastern Mediterranean gambit.¹⁰ The UAE helped consolidate Haftar's position after the war, allegedly bankrolling the Wagner Group's continued presence.¹¹ Emirati companies have also engaged in reconstruction and other activities in Haftar-controlled eastern Libya.¹² Ankara¹³ and Abu Dhabi¹⁴ have made economic encroachments into each other's spheres while attempting to extend their influence over key personalities therein. In addition, Turkish energy companies are exploring investments in eastern oilfields through Haftar's son Saddam, while the UAE is scoping out roles in the new free trade zones that are being developed under Dbeibah.¹⁵

The paradigm of the post-normalization intrigue where all benefit, but some more than others, was illustrated by Abu Dhabi brokering a deal between Dbeibah and Haftar, ending the latter's long-term oil blockade. Crucially, the deal involved appointing the former central bank

governor Farhat Bengdara as the new chairman of Libya's National Oil Company (NOC)¹⁶ who is closely connected to Abu Dhabi, allegedly even holding Emirati citizenship.¹⁷ Whilst all but the Libyans themselves benefited from the increased capital flows following the resumption of oil sales, the UAE now dominates Libya's key asset.

Unlike the UAE, Egypt has pursued a more confrontational policy with Türkiye, despite the ongoing détente between Ankara and Cairo.¹⁸ Initially, Egypt also exploited Dbeibah's business-diplomacy¹⁹ to great profit. However, Cairo quickly turned on Dbeibah, and in 2022 spent considerable time trying to replace him with a new prime minister, Fathi Bashagha, who was appointed through Egypt's main proxy, Libya's parliamentary speaker.²⁰ Ankara was wary of Egypt's strategy, which they considered overly entitled given Cairo lost the war for Tripoli, yet it retained control of Libya's legislature and was now actively trying to capture its judiciary and executive. So, when Bashagha attacked Tripoli after failing to politically seize power, Türkiye decisively intervened to end the fighting and tried to stabilize the situation.²¹ This friction between Egypt and Türkiye over Libya hampered their reconciliation process. Despite continuous failure, Cairo doubled down on their Libya position, publicly refusing to recognize Tripoli's government at the Arab League²² and trying to diplomatically isolate them. One of Cairo's alleged three conditions for full normalization with Ankara was to end Türkiye's military presence in Libya.²³

THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE SHOCKWAVE

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered geopolitical shockwaves that arguably heightened the precariousness of the normalization and Libyan stability. First, the West's absorption in the conflict and its support for Ukraine left other foreign policy issues unattended, allowing Libya's transition to drift and be delegated to regional actors. Consequently, Libya's hopes of resurrecting the failed elections of 2021 received a major blow the year after as Egypt took control of the process,²⁴ refocusing the transition from elections to Egypt's bid to reshuffle Libya's government. Today, the shifting focus to combatting Russian operations globally has led to senior U.S. officials reaching out to Haftar²⁵ and a Libya policy that centers on constructing a new joint military body²⁶ to expel the Wagner Group from Libya, rather than focusing on Libyan elections.

The economic shockwaves of the invasion of Ukraine that impacted already fragile economies like Egypt and Türkiye, likely catalyzed more direct maneuvers for Libyan assets. This aligns with Egypt's shift from working with Dbeibah to trying to replace him. Although Libya accounts for roughly just 1% of the global oil market as of 2022,²⁷ the oil price spike and urgency to compensate for Russian sanctions elevated Libya's value and led the UAE to seize the NOC by lifting the oil blockade. The Abu Dhabi deal, which added roughly 850,000 barrels per day to the global markets,²⁸ was likely facilitated by Biden's failed attempt to persuade Saudi Arabia to increase production by 600,000 barrels per day.²⁹ Without the desperate need for additional oil in the market, the initial move to replace the NOC chair would have faced stiffer resistance, and the division of Libya's oil revenues among its conquerors would have received greater scrutiny. Ultimately, the inflated oil revenues that do not benefit ordinary Libyans, together with price inflation and ongoing liquidity problems have caused the quality of life in Libya to drop rapidly.

CONCLUSION

If, as the cliché goes, war is simply politics by other means, then Libya's case study demonstrates that the ongoing normalization in the MENA region is simply war by other means. Whether the more sophisticated Türkiye-UAE dynamic, involving consolidation alongside political moves for key assets or influence in rival territories, or the cruder Egyptian challenge to Turkish positions, the underlying antagonistic and competitive dynamic persists, leaving numerous possibilities for it to reignite into a hot proxy conflict. Moreover, the entire competition is built upon the exploitation of Libya's weakness. Following over a decade of state failure, dilapidation, and numerous failed international attempts to drive political progress, Libyan patience is wearing thin.³⁰ The longer this venal abusive mode of politics persists, the more likely that a mass disruptive event will occur (such as in 2011), undermining the entire basis of normalization in Libya and other states where regional powers compete.

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PATHWAYS TO PEACE IN YEMEN

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INTRODUCTION

The past year has brought renewed hope for peace in war-torn Yemen. Following a six-month truce, Omani-facilitated negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Houthi insurgents have produced the outlines of a deal. Some view this as a promising step toward a comprehensive and lasting peace,¹ while others are more skeptical, and see the agreement as reflecting Saudi fatigue with the conflict and attempts by the Houthis to consolidate gains before pushing ahead with a new round of fighting.²

The reality lies somewhere in between. The negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis have focused mainly on peripheral issues, such as back payment of state employees' salaries and an end to the blockade on airports and ports.³ While these issues are important to build the necessary trust between the warring parties, they serve as preliminary steps ahead of negotiating more fundamental issues, such as how power will be shared and how natural resources will be divided. Also, if a lasting peace is to be reached, the negotiations must quickly move to include other key players, including the internationally-recognized transitional government, the southern separatist movement, and other local actors and tribal leaders, as well as various regional and international actors engaged in Yemen.⁴ However, negotiating more fundamental issues among a wider range of players is much more difficult. The warring factions know this; power-sharing agreements have a long history of failure in Yemen.⁵ Consequently, the Houthis and the transitional government are understandably preparing for a resumption of the conflict if negotiations fail.

The path toward a reunited Yemen requires some concessions, including a willingness to accept that the Houthis and the southern separatists will have significant autonomy in their respective spheres of influence. However, it also requires establishing clear red lines with clear consequences if crossed. The Houthis, especially, have a track record of making demands without following through on commitments.⁶ The path to unification also requires international actors to propose a reconstruction and recovery agenda that is preferable to renewed fighting, including trade agreements with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the European Union (EU). If the Yemeni factions and international actors fail to pursue this path, then they are better off negotiating how to divide the country and its resources. The alternative would be a return to fighting and continued suffering and misery for the Yemeni people.

THE LONG, BLOODY STALEMATE

The war in Yemen has raged on since 2014, resulting in close to 400,000 deaths, many of them children succumbing to hunger and disease.⁷ The conflict is widely regarded as the world's greatest man-made humanitarian disaster, with around 80% of the population needing humanitarian assistance.⁸ Over the past decade, Yemen, already the poorest country in the Middle East before the conflict,⁹ has seen its economy collapse, its infrastructure destroyed, and a generation of young people marginalized.

The conflict has mainly pitted the forces of the Supreme Political Council (SPC) to the north, led by the Houthi movement and, initially, by the late former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, against a transitional government in the south, backed by a Saudi-led coalition of forces, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and their allies, the Southern Separatist Council.

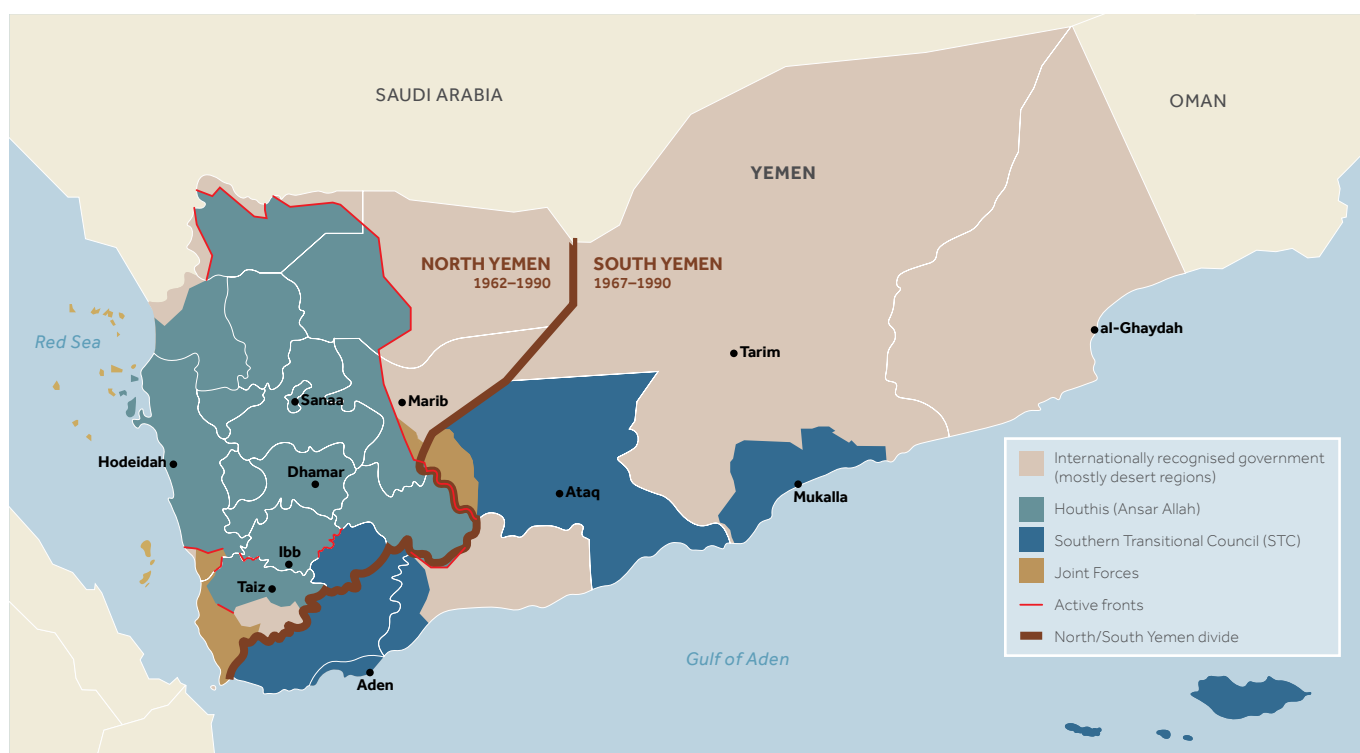
The transitional government, initially led by an interim president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, is currently governed by an eight-member Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) whose members have been selected by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.¹⁰ Members of the former ruling party, the General People's Congress, are divided between the two camps. While Iran supports the Houthis, Western powers have been backing the Saudi-led coalition.

The war has produced a stalemate, with neither side able to gain much ground. However, the past year has raised the prospect of peace. On April 2, 2022, the United Nations (UN) brokered a two-month truce which led to a lull in fighting. The truce was renewed twice, and although the formal agreement lapsed on October 2, 2022, the parties have maintained the ceasefire, allowing negotiations to end the conflict to continue. Importantly, the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, the two strongest forces on the ground, have been involved in direct negotiations since October 2022.¹¹ The Saudi-Iran rapprochement may further support peace efforts in Yemen. However, while these negotiations may produce a long-term ceasefire, achieving reunification of the country will require a concerted effort by all interested parties.

THE BATTLELINES HAVE HARDENED

Not long ago, Yemen was a divided country. It fractured in the early twentieth century, in the wake of a declining Ottoman Empire and British colonial rule of the south. The divide persisted during the Cold War, which saw Northern and Southern Yemen fall under different spheres of influence. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yemen was reunited, forming the Republic of Yemen in May 1990, with Sanaa as its capital and the northern president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, as its leader. Not everyone was aligned on this, however, and a strong southern separatist movement persisted (figure 1).

Figure 1: Yemen's Territorial Control Map



Source: Map created by the ME Council.

Today, the SPC controls northern areas of the country, including the capital Sanaa, where two-thirds of the population live. Throughout the conflict, the SPC has enjoyed the tacit support of Iran. While it has managed to maintain control over its territory despite facing challenges from the Saudi-led military coalition, the SPC has faced fierce local opposition to its attempts to take over the oil-rich territory of Marib and the commercial center of Taiz, both of which were once part of the state of northern Yemen. The Houthis, formidable fighters as they are, are mostly composed of the Zaydi minority with a stronghold in the northern governorates of Amran and Saada. Even if they succeeded militarily, they would be hard-pressed to govern the entire country. Indeed, the movement itself is composed of various groups and interests that could eventually splinter.¹²

The transitional government controls southern areas of the country that cover two-thirds of Yemen's territory. While it enjoys international recognition, it lacks legitimacy at home given its reliance on foreign powers. Its hold on power is sustained by the support of the Saudi-led military coalition, and for most of his tenure as interim president, Hadi operated out of Riyadh. The transitional government's two-year mandate to govern while the details of an agreement were sorted out as part of a UN-brokered national dialogue from 2012–2014 has long expired. Finally, the PLC is fractured, with its strongest faction, the Southern Separatist Council, effectively controlling the former southern capital of Aden, and pursuing its own agenda for an independent southern state.

The international community wishes to see Yemen remain united. However, the forces keeping it apart are formidable. First, after a decade of conflict, the current battlelines have hardened, dividing the country into separate areas that overlap significantly with the old border separating the north from the south. Second, under a united Yemen, the Houthis will have to relinquish political control of the capital. Despite their professed interest in a united Yemen, giving up power would require substantial concessions, including greater control over a large share of northern territories, which the Saudis are loath to do. Third, the strongest force in the south, southern separatists, want a split. Again, appeasing them would require granting them substantial autonomy over areas they already control. Finally, previous efforts at a national dialogue, sponsored by the UN between 2012 and 2014, left both the Houthis and southern separatists feeling marginalized.¹³ They are unlikely to trust such a process again.

This brings us to the ultimate barrier to compromise and peace, the issue of trust. Even if all parties see the benefits of working toward a lasting peace in a united country, laying down their arms and retreating from hardened battle positions requires believing that the other side will live up to their commitments under any agreement. Moreover, both sides harbor concerns about the influence of foreign powers that might compromise any commitments. The transitional government and coalition forces can point to breaches in the truce as evidence of the Houthis' lukewarm commitment to a lasting agreement, including their reluctance to open roads leading to the bedogged city of Taiz.¹⁴ The Houthis participated in the national dialogue only to arrive at an outcome that they suspected of reflecting Saudi interests. The Saudis in turn are concerned about Iranian influence behind the scenes.

THE PATH TOWARD REUNIFICATION

Not everything is aligned against a unified Yemen. First, the international community continues to push for unification, viewing it as a necessary condition for stability and security in the country. Second, Yemen is a poor country with scarce resources, including some oil that may continue to be fought over; it stands a better chance of mobilizing resources for development as a unified country. Third, the Houthis profess to want a unified country; their issues at the outset had more to do with perceived marginalization, international interference, and local corruption.¹⁵ They may be willing to trade off power for some regional autonomy and a share in the country's oil wealth. Fourth, the southern separatists, while being the strongest force in the south, are not the only voice there. Finally, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement may assuage Saudi concerns about wider Iranian designs in Yemen enough for them to finalize a deal with the Houthis.

Thus, there is a viable path forward toward a reunited Yemen that arguably rests on three pillars:

First, a united Yemen must be based on a federal system. Neither the Houthis nor the southern separatists will want to relinquish the gains they have made or the power they wield in their respective spheres of influence. Both sides will want to maintain a substantial role in a united country. Indeed, Yemeni tribes and groups in other regions of the country also require assurances of autonomy and can act as spoilers to any deal that they do not agree with. This requires negotiating on a federalist structure with a relatively weak central government (initially) as well as reducing the number of regions proposed under the UN-sponsored national dialogue (possibly to three) and adjusting their geographic coverage to align with current realities on the ground.

Second, while Yemen does not have much oil wealth, it is still enough to fight over. The Houthis' repeated attempts to capture the governorate of Marib, where much of the oil resides, is evidence of this. The fact that Marib was also historically part of northern Yemen is an added incentive. The warring parties need to agree that revenues from oil need to be shared across all the regions of a federal Yemen. One possible approach would involve depositing oil revenues into a dedicated fund, earmarked for specific agreed-upon objectives, such as economic recovery, rebuilding communities, or rebuilding education systems.

Third, the Yemeni factions will need to see reunification as a more attractive option than continued fighting. This will require the international community to articulate a golden path for the country, with the resources it needs to rebuild and recover economically. Public institutions that have atrophied due to division, brain drain, and non-payment of salaries will need to be rehabilitated. Foreign aid needs to switch from humanitarian assistance to development aid. Also, the EU and GCC can promise greater economic integration and favorable trade terms for Yemen if it meets specific milestones. By channeling these resources through the central government, international actors can strengthen their position to retain and build authority over time, even in the face of strong regional power centers.

It is noteworthy that the Yemeni sides of the conflict appear to agree on fundamental values and principles. First, there is a genuine wish to limit foreign interference in the domestic affairs of the country, be it Iranian influence or Saudi or U.S. involvement. While foreign entities like to point fingers at others, they are reticent to acknowledge their own involvement as interference. Second, there is acceptance of the importance of devolution of authority. Yemen remains a tribal country which requires local administration of public affairs. There is less consensus over the issue of a unified country, but a federal system might be a logical framework, assuming that acceptable lines can be drawn. Third, there appears to be commitment, at least verbally, to the principles of good governance.

FACING THE ALTERNATIVE

While these three pillars need to be addressed to achieve a lasting peace in a unified Yemen, they are by no means the only issues. Yemen remains fractured both between and within the two main coalitions vying for power, along with other groups. There are many interests that need to be satisfied, and many spoilers capable of derailing a potential agreement. Furthermore, oil and land are not the only resources that people will fight over. The Houthis want the region under their control to have an outlet onto the Red Sea, even though the nearest port, Hodeida, is not part of their traditional base. Also, Yemen is among the most water-stressed countries in the world and tensions over access to water and farmland will likely increase. Finally, regional powers will likely try to tilt the outcome towards their desired group, as they have done all along. In short, the road toward a unified Yemen is likely to be long and arduous.

If negotiations towards a unified Yemen prove unsuccessful, the warring parties and the international community should swallow the bitter pill of exploring the idea of a formal separation.¹⁶ The alternative would be a resumption of fighting and continued death and suffering for the Yemeni people. The parties would still need to agree on the borders of each entity and find a mechanism for sharing resources, but the incentive to fight would diminish and issues of power sharing would be handled within each camp. Of course, many of the issues would remain, including power sharing within each entity. The Houthis would remain a minority in the northern region they currently occupy and would need to explore inclusive governance structures. The same can be said for the South. Here too, the international community has a role to play.

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CONCLUSION

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The regional reset remains an unfinished project. The final outcome of processes underway is still unknown. As the reignition of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has illustrated, this process is fragile and reversible. To state it differently, the Middle East is yet to define what comes after the de-escalation and normalization phases of recent years in regional politics. In the end, de-escalation and normalization cannot be ends in themselves. Rather they should serve as a means to other ends. Despite this, certain features of the de-escalation process have become more evident.

Firstly, the narrative of the regional reset has been heavily economy-centric. While mending their ties, erstwhile regional antagonists are enhancing economic cooperation and trade links among themselves, with limited talks about their regional geopolitical interests. The idea of regional economic connectivity features prominently in their discourse. The rationale for this is obvious. Almost all regional players have experienced economic pressures to varying degrees. Türkiye has faced soaring inflation and a depreciating currency. The Iranian economy, besieged by sanctions, and the Egyptian economy, under a mountain of international debt, are in crisis. Meanwhile, many regional states, such as Saudi Arabia, have advanced ambitious economic development projects. Such developmentalist visions are not only crucial for these countries to secure their economic future, but they are also key for these regimes to cultivate political legitimacy for their rule. Therefore, unlike the last decade when regional players engaged in fierce geopolitical rivalries at the expense of their economies, in the new period they aim to bridge the gap between their economic needs and foreign policy ambitions.

Secondly, a common denominator among regional actors is their frustration with the United States' (U.S.) foreign policy in the region. Apart from long-standing U.S. foes such as Iran, traditional U.S. partners, such as Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates, are increasingly discontent with the unpredictability and unreliability of U.S. engagement. These states appear to believe that the U.S. is not attentive to their security concerns and its gradual further withdrawal from the region is inevitable. This perception (or reality) has partially driven the region's de-escalation and informs its growing multipolarity. To counter this, the U.S. seems to be exploring different options, but to no avail thus far. During the 2023 Group of 20 summit in India, the launch of the landmark India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor (IMEC) was announced. The U.S. lauded the project, which is seen as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, the idea of a Saudi-Israeli normalization, buttressed by a strong U.S. commitment to Saudi security, was gaining traction in Washington prior to Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel and the ensuing conflict. Despite U.S. efforts, the trend of multipolarity in the Middle East is unlikely to be reversed, with regional actors rejecting the binary choices implied by U.S. policy toward the region and Russia's and China's regional roles. As Richard Outzen aptly puts it, "the region is not an orchestra in need of a conductor; it is a geopolitical marketplace that requires players to conduct their own savvy bargaining and ensure reliable transactions."

More ominously, in the face of Israel's invasion of Gaza and its associated humanitarian crisis, the United States' and other Western actors' unreserved support for Israel is set to further deepen the discontent between them and the regional actors. China and Russia will probably try to capitalize on this discontent and make further inroads into the region. For instance, from the start, the IMEC has appeared to be a hastily devised initiative with limited prospects for its implementation. However, the conflict puts the future of this initiative further in doubt, if not spelling its death, particularly if the conflict becomes regionalized.

In addition, the process of Israel's regional normalization has come to a halt, at least for the foreseeable future. To the chagrin of the U.S., the prized Saudi-Israeli normalization has stalled for the time. Even if such normalization efforts regain momentum in the future, Riyadh will likely demand a higher price from the U.S. and Israel, including a more prominent Palestinian dimension to justify their normalization at the domestic and regional levels. In fact, any future normalization process between Arab states and Israel would have to address the Palestinian question. The prospect of Arab-Israeli normalization with no reference to, or at the expense of, Palestinians has largely run its course. Indeed, whether there will be a reversal in any of Israel's normalized relations with the Arab countries has become a more pertinent question. Against the dire humanitarian picture and Israel's invasion of Gaza, societal pressures are mounting on Arab states to cut ties with Israel. As such, continuing along the trajectory of normalization would also widen the gap between people and regimes across the Arab world, deepening these regimes' security concerns and exacerbating the unpopular perception of the U.S./West among Arab publics.

Thirdly, the scorecard of the regional reset on regional battlegrounds is mixed. This process has offered glimmers of hope and borne positive results in Iraq and Yemen. In Yemen, as Nader Kabbani puts it, despite many intractable challenges ahead and the possibility of things collapsing again, the United Nations-brokered truce in April 2022 has effectively held, although it formally expired in October 2022. The two main parties in the conflict, Saudi Arabia and Ansar Allah (the Houthi movement), have been engaged in talks on a permanent ceasefire, and the easing of tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia aids this process.

Likewise, the reset allows regional actors to acquire new roles in regional politics. The case in point is Iraq—a site for regional contestation since the U.S. invasion of the country in 2003. Regional rivalries deepened the fragmentation of Iraqi sovereignty, which prevented the country from playing a meaningful role in regional politics. As Kamaran Palani argues in his chapter, the regional reset and cooperation enhance Iraq's sovereignty. More specifically, the reset offers Iraq opportunities to further its regional integration and the consolidation of its sovereignty, as this process decreases the appetite for proxy conflicts among regional powers involved in Iraq. In addition, capitalizing on the regional de-escalation, Iraq has played the role of convener through its Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership. Indeed, Iraq played a pivotal role in mediating and facilitating discussions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, paving the way for the China-mediated agreement for the two regional powers to restore diplomatic ties.

However, a similar picture cannot be drawn for Syria and Libya. In general, the reset has culminated in de-escalation in regional conflict zones as well. Compared to a few years ago, there is a relative lull in Syria and Libya—similar to Yemen. More dialogues among erstwhile regional rivals are taking place to find common ground and protect their interests. For instance, the level of engagement and talks between Türkiye, the UAE, and Egypt on Libya has intensified. In the same vein, with a return to the Arab League enabled by Saudi Arabia, Syria's regional normalization has gained momentum. A process is underway to normalize ties between Ankara and Damascus. Moscow has effectively situated itself as the gatekeeper of any such prospective normalization.

Despite these trends, as the rapid escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows, the relative lull in regional conflict zones is fragile and can be deceptive, particularly in Syria and Libya. The sources of societal tension and geopolitical disputes remain unaddressed and can be reignited. In these two contexts, the local actors are not participants in regional normalization, and their aspirations and interests are not taken into account during this process. Regional normalization with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria is ongoing without any significant concessions to the Syrian opposition and without a clear vision for improving the political and economic conditions in Syria. In Libya, the geographical and administrative division remains in place, if not entrenched. Therefore, de-escalation in these two conflict zones is about the external players, not the local actors and differences. In fact, this de-escalation comes at their expense. In addition, if the Gaza war spirals out of control and gains a regional character, especially if Hezbollah enters the fray, the proxy war between the U.S. and Iran will probably gain steam, which in return might lead to escalation in conflict or quasi-conflict zones, not least in Syria and Iraq. However, despite high-pitched rhetoric, all state actors have thus far exercised a high-degree of caution and operated in a risk-averse manner.

Fourth, the fierce rivalries of the previous decades have prevented regional actors from cooperating on issues of common challenge and interest. The reset should change this. At this stage, region-wide cooperation or multilateralism is unrealistic. However, issue-based cooperation and minilateralism are possible and even necessary. Climate, water scarcity, migration, disaster management, energy, food security, economic connectivity, and maritime security are shared issues and challenges of the regional states. There has been a long-standing debate about how to sequence regional cooperation: through low politics or high politics? The answer to this question is never straightforward. However, one thing is clear: there is not much difference between the issue of low politics or high politics in the Middle East. High politics turn almost all issues of low politics into high politics and determine whether states can cooperate on issues of low politics. For instance, ideological and geopolitical rivalries have prevented states from cooperating on migration, energy, climate, or water security in earnest—issues that are often portrayed as belonging to the realm of the low politics. De-escalation of high politics across the region should lay better foundations for regional cooperation and minilateralism, which should serve as building blocks for region-wide multilateralism down the road. But conversely, the expansion of the war in Gaza would severely limit any functional regional minilateralist endeavor that involves Israel. Plus, while the conflict can increase the channels of communications between the Arab Gulf states and Türkiye, it can also put more pressure on the relations between the Arab Gulf states and Iran, as Tehran tries to portray itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause.

Finally, as stated at the outset, a pressing question of contemporary regional politics is what comes after the de-escalation and normalization of recent years. Will this process lead to more regional cooperation, minilateralism, and an inclusive regional security architecture? Or is this phase just a prelude to regional rivalries? More importantly, how can regional states move from reset to regional cooperation and then to a cooperative and inclusive regional security order? These questions will inform our upcoming workshops and publications on the subject and should guide similar work elsewhere. Needless to say, addressing these questions will necessitate a deeper understanding of the trajectory and dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



ABOUT

THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

The Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) is an independent, non-profit policy research institution based in Doha, Qatar. The ME Council produces policy-relevant research, convenes meetings and dialogues, and engages policy actors on geopolitical and socioeconomic issues facing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The ME Council serves as a bridge between the MENA region and the rest of the world, providing a regional perspective on global policy issues and establishing partnerships with other leading research centers and development organizations across the MENA region and the world.

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The editors would like to thank all the authors for their original and timely contributions. We also thank Nejla Ben Mimoune for her excellent management of the editorial and publication process. Finally, we thank the ME Council's communication team for their helpful support.



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