



MIDDLE EAST PERSPECTIVES

The shifting security landscape in the Middle East: An Egyptian perspective

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Introduction

Looking at the current state of the Middle East, even the seasoned observer will be hard pressed to come up with an adequate frame of analysis to explain what seems to be an unprecedented state of regional instability. The region is today seemingly caught in a vortex of armed conflict, failed states, ideological extremism, a resurgence of identity politics, multiple civil wars, insurgencies intertwined with terrorism, the use of weapons of mass destruction, and a catalogue of human suffering that have few precedents in contemporary global politics. Rarely has it experienced such a state of strategic disarray.

The prevailing regional instability tends to defy conventional frames of analysis based on geopolitical power competition and power politics. This is because the nature and scope of the current instability has profound implications that touch on the question of regional order itself: To what extent do the current strategic dynamics reflect a breakdown of regional order? Can we discern the emergence of a new regional order? What would such an alternative order look like? Most importantly, how is the current order being contested, and by whom?

Eroding Pillars of Regional Order

The current state of regional disarray in the Middle East can be traced back to the confluence of two strategic trends that have evolved gradually over the course of the last two decades: The weakening of the Arab core, and the shift in the strategic posture of the United States towards the region.

The Arab state system, despite what many recognised to be the divergent political and geopolitical interests of its actors, constituted a regional framework based on a common history, language and, above all, regional political identity. In a sense, the Arab framework provided for the management of regional politics, both with respect to the mitigation of inter-Arab rivalries and as a strategic counter-balance to the region's non-Arab neighbours. Arab support for Iraq during its eight-year long war with Iran; the political consensus in support of Syria's intervention in the Lebanese civil war; the

political cover provided by the Arab League in 1990 that paved the way for the US-led international coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation; Egypt's 1998 diplomatic intervention to defuse the crisis between Syria and Turkey; the 2003 Arab Peace Initiative, which provided a framework for comprehensive peace with Israel: All exemplified how the Arab core functioned as a strategic pillar of regional order, albeit a shaky one.

The 2003 US invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq was the first of several regional shocks that set the Arab system on a course toward gradual fragmentation. The Arab failure to intervene politically in the post-invasion phase of Iraqi politics ceded the strategic initiative to Iran. This was followed by the inability to counter Israel's destructive war against Lebanon in 2006 and its repeated military assaults on Gaza, and the failure to check Iran's growing influence in Lebanon. All of this took place against the backdrop of a creeping legitimacy crisis that beset the Arab regimes as they proved increasingly unable to cope with the challenges of governance stemming from mounting socio-economic pressures and an inability to transition to a more pluralistic political order. The onset of the Arab uprisings delivered the final shock that left the Arab core in a state of disarray, bordering, in some instances, on the verge of collapse - as evidenced most clearly in Libya and Yemen.

No less consequential in its implications for the trajectory of regional politics has been the shift in the US strategic posture towards the region. Since the second half of the 1970s, Washington's Middle East policy has been predicated on a commitment – however ambivalent – to regional stability and the preservation of some semblance of regional order. At the core of this commitment was the maintenance of a regional security system that was based on a network of regional alliance relationships (Israel, Egypt, the GCC states, Jordan); a strategy of mitigating regional rivalries, at least among its core allies; a security commitment to the Gulf Arab states; and deterring regional revisionist powers (Iran, Iraq), all of which were buttressed by a regional military presence that was initiated after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Washington's regional posture in the wake of the 1990-91 Gulf War was in many ways the epitome of this strategy. Combining a measure of strategic restraint in forgoing a strategy of regime change in Iraq, America pursued a regional diplomatic and security agenda centred on the Arab-Israeli peace process, fostering multilateral cooperation between regional states, a dual-containment policy against both Iran and Iraq, and strengthening its security guarantee with respect to the Gulf.

Over the course of the last decade, this strategy underwent a major re-evaluation as regional developments steadily undermined the fundamental tenets of America's Middle East policy. The demise of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, the toll of the Iraq and Afghan wars and the failure of America's state-building project in both countries, the chaos that ensued in the wake of the NATO intervention in Libya, and the inability to shape the trajectory of the Arab uprisings all contributed to a sense of policy fatigue in Washington over what President of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass would describe as the post-American Middle East¹. In parallel, the place of the Middle East in the context of America's overall global strategy would also witness a significant reassessment. The fracking revolution in North America and the rise of China as a rival

¹ Richard Haass, "The New Middle East" *Foreign Affairs* November/December 2006.

power downgraded the strategic centrality of the Middle East, giving rise to a policy agenda that prioritised managing great power competition with Beijing and Moscow over what seemed to be the unmitigated risk and minimal strategic benefit associated with military intervention in the region.

As a consequence of this re-assessment, Washington's policy focus shifted from a strategic emphasis on maintaining regional order and the management of regional conflicts to a narrower set of interests, namely counter-terrorism, halting the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and the defence of key regional allies — minimally defined as deterring direct acts of aggression. The abdication of any commitment to multilateral nation-building — or conflict resolution agenda — in Libya following the Nato campaign, the pursuit of a vigorous nuclear diplomacy agenda with Iran, the counter-ISIS campaign in Syria and Iraq, and the repeated use of force in retaliation for the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime all exemplified the more limited set of priorities that guided US policy.

What is perhaps most telling is the degree to which such policies were seemingly divorced from broader regional security concerns: The nuclear agreement with Iran was predicated on insulating the P5+1 negotiating process from the destabilising effects of Iran's regional interventions; Washington's use of force in Syria adhered strictly to a counter-terrorism and counter-WMD mission and was detached from the broader considerations relating to the Syrian civil war itself; and Washington's anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq was accompanied by only half-hearted attempts at fostering a broader power-sharing arrangement between the Shi'ite dominated government in Baghdad and the array of Sunni political forces that were increasingly politically marginalised.

Moreover, the trajectory of US regional policy remained, for the most part, consistent despite a change in administration. Irrespective of the veracity of President Donald Trump's claim that the United States had "stupidly" spent US\$7 trillion on Middle East wars, this statement clearly telegraphed a reluctance to revert to a policy of military intervention, a posture clearly reflected in his decision to withdraw US troops from Syria against the advice of much of his national security establishment. The Trump Administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of sanctions against Iran signalled not so much a readiness to confront the Islamic Republic in any of the regional conflict theatres in which it has established a presence (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, or Yemen), but an abandonment of the multilateral diplomacy that was employed to freeze the country's nuclear programme and an aggressive posture of economic warfare coupled with vague aspirations for regime change in Tehran among its neo-conservative wing.

The re-assessment of America's Middle East policy did not result in a "withdrawal" from the region, as is commonly perceived. Rather, what occurred was an American withdrawal from the region's conflicts, militarily and, to a large extent, diplomatically. Washington's pursuit of a narrower regional security agenda came at the expense of many key alliance relationships which began to fray. The nuclear deal with Iran would result in a deep schism with the GCC states and Israel. The reluctance to intervene in the Syrian civil war against the Assad regime in order to counter Iran's growing presence — made all too evident by President Barack Obama's abandonment of his self-proclaimed "red line" against the use of chemical weapons by the regime — only reinforced what had already become a growing divide. The tactical alliance with the Kurds as the only credible ground force

capable of confronting the Islamic State in northern Syria triggered a deep sense of anxiety on the part of Turkey at the prospect of Kurdish separatism on its southern border. And all of this took place against the backdrop of what was perceived as Washington's abandonment of the Mubarak regime in the wake of the uprising in Egypt.

Interventionism and Deepening Regional Insecurity

The convergence of these two strategic shifts had profound implications for regional order. The weakness of the Arab core produced a general condition of state weakness in a number of key Arab countries at the very moment when the region's security environment was undergoing a process of momentous change, thus giving rise to an acute sense of strategic uncertainty.

The severity of the political crisis that has beset key Arab states – primarily Iraq and Syria, and a state of near collapse in Libya and Yemen – in many ways marked a reversal of the trend towards state consolidation that took hold since the 1970s, whereby strong centralised governments were able to assert their sovereignty and instill a sense of national identity. With the onset of the Arab uprisings, a situation of chronic state permeability took hold, in which states were subject to a host of regional influences – geopolitical competition, sectarian-based intervention, and transnational ideologies – that undermined their political sovereignty. As the Arab uprisings descended into armed and civil conflict, this permeability opened up new arenas for regional strategic competition, whether through direct intervention or by proxy. What would emerge as a result was a highly complex dynamic, defined not just by political and strategic interaction at the state level, but by an increasing tendency for regional geopolitical competition to extend deep into the political conflict within states.

For decades, Lebanon was the quintessential example of this dynamic, where regional powers engaged with the country's sectarian groups in an ever-shifting matrix of regional-domestic alignments. With the fraying of the Arab state order, this pattern was replicated in several conflict arenas, beginning with Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and continuing in various forms to Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya. The conflicts produced by the Arab uprisings have thus become regionalised, and in Syria, globalised, as domestic actors invited outside intervention, whether through armed proxies, material support, or, in some cases, direct military intervention.

The fraying of the Arab core brought in its wake the increasing sectarianisation of regional politics. The political categories of radicalism vs. conservatism that have traditionally characterised regional ideological competition over the issues of Arabism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and pro-Western alignment no longer apply. In their place has emerged an array of alternative ethno-sectarian political identities that today characterise much of the regional competition at the ideational level. Even the ideologies of political Islam have come to be defined in sectarian terms of Sunni vs. Shia.

The actors in this environment are not just states, but non-state actors in the form of armed proxies (the various groups that make up the bulk of the Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq), hybrid groups that retain some political representation in governments while maintaining a distinct military wing (Hezbollah, Hamas), and terrorist groups sustained by sectarian insurgencies (the Islamic State). Transnational movements which often exhibit ideological extremism but co-exist

alongside the formal state system have emerged as a key factor in the state-to-state politics in the region. The regional struggle surrounding the role of the Muslim Brotherhood is a case in point: Countries such as Qatar and Turkey saw in the Brotherhood a force that can be co-opted for their own regional strategic interests, while Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE saw it as a subversive one that routinely merged with terrorist groups throughout the region.

The resulting regional security dynamic led to a highly divergent and complex array of threat perceptions among the major regional actors. Geopolitical competition was perceived not just in terms of conventional threats to national security, but also in terms of threats to domestic political order and regime survival. Regional strategic competition thus took the form of a complex realignment of diplomatic, military, political and ideational power. This in turn would breed a type of maximalist security doctrine that would perceive threats in near existential terms.

The deepening regional insecurity fostered by this transformed conflict environment was greatly compounded by the strategic uncertainty caused by Washington's erratic response to these unfolding developments. This was to have a profound effect on the strategic calculus of America's allies and adversaries alike. For the former, the issue went beyond mere policy differences over Washington's regional strategy, as it raised deep misgivings about the reliability of the United States as a strategic actor in the Middle East, and – especially with respect to the Arab Gulf states – the credibility of the US security guarantee. For the latter, there was little sense that the United States would constrain its actions in pursuit of a strategic advantage in the emerging regional environment.

The wave of interventionism across the region's conflict theatres was in many ways born out of this sense of strategic uncertainty. Key regional states felt compelled to act unilaterally in the face of what decision-makers perceived to be growing strategic vulnerability arising from the region's escalating civil wars. The degree to which this was to transform the prevailing conflict environment in the region was profound. The Middle East has historically been one of the most conflict-prone regions in contemporary global politics. However, much of this was attributed to conventional armed conflicts between states - the Arab-Israeli wars, the Iran-Iraq war, the second Gulf War between the US-led coalition and Iraq being the most notable examples. Intervention by regional powers in the Middle East's civil wars or the invasion of weaker states was relatively infrequent, averaging once every decade (Egypt in Yemen during the 1960s, Syria in Lebanon in 1975, Israel in Lebanon in 1982, and Iraq in Kuwait in 1990). This record stands in stark contrast to the current pattern of intervention, where the region has witnessed the near-simultaneous intervention – politically and militarily – in at least six conflict arenas: Syria (Iran, Turkey, Russia, the GCC); Iraq (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey); Bahrain (Saudi Arabia, Iran); Yemen (Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE); Libya (Egypt, Turkey, the UAE); and Lebanon (Iran, Saudi Arabia).

The Challenge of the Non-Arab Middle East

As the pillars of the “old” regional system were undermined, the Middle East entered into a new phase in which the political and ideological norms, as well as the balance of power of the emerging order, were contested. The primary challengers to the old order are regional powers that make up the non-Arab Middle East. Israel, Iran and Turkey have each put forward its own “project” for an

alternative vision of regional order, founded on a set of power relationships, rules, and frameworks for regional identity fundamentally different than those which prevailed in the “old” regional order.

These “projects” are not wholly new, but have assumed a more assertive quality as the current conflict environment offers greater opportunities to exploit them, enabled by the inability of the Arab order to address the post-Arab uprising conflicts. The failure to devise “Arab” solutions to the region’s burgeoning crises increasingly ceded the diplomatic, military and political initiative outside the Arab core to the non-Arab periphery, with the Arab role reduced very much to ad-hoc involvement of individual states in particular conflicts.

The Limits of Iran’s ‘Sectarian’ Regional Reach

Iran’s role as a leading regional power draws on the historic legacy of Persia’s imperial tradition, its revolutionary Islamic credentials, and the mobilising power of a political discourse of liberation on behalf of oppressed people throughout the region. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran’s foreign policy has been imbued with a deeply ideological streak that champions the cause of anti-Western imperialism, and in particular an anti-American – and by extension anti-Israeli – political agenda, together with a messianic mission to export the Islamic revolution – if not its specific brand of theocratic rule – beyond the country itself.

Complementing this ideological posture, a host of factors related to geopolitical vulnerability, regime insecurity and Shiite sectarian affinity would combine to form Iran’s regional strategic outlook and shape its regional policy. The eight-year war with Iraq established what would be an inextricable link between Iran’s security and the broader regional security environment. As a non-Arab state, Iran was left regionally isolated against Iraq, with the sole exception of Syria, a predicament that reinforced for Tehran the imperative of finding inroads into the Arab world. Driven by the need for regional strategic depth, deterrence against America’s allies to counter the threat posed by the US military presence in the Gulf, and upholding the legitimacy of its revolutionary discourse, Iran has sought to expand its regional reach in the Arab east beyond its traditional sphere of influence in the Gulf.

This gave rise to a policy of regional interventionism as a means of forward defence of the Islamic Republic. Over the years, Iran would deploy a sophisticated array of strategic assets to operationalise this policy: A network of ties to Shiite communities and seminaries throughout the Arab world, particularly in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and certain parts of the Gulf; a host of Iranian-supported Shiite armed proxies that it would cultivate to provide an unconventional warfare capability — of which Lebanon’s Hezbollah was the most renowned; and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its external operations arm, the Quds Force, which provides a capability for military intervention without relying directly on the regular Iranian armed forces.

Iran’s regional strategy often found political expression in the “axis of resistance” grouping anti-American and anti-Israeli forces in the region, including Syria, Hezbollah, and Palestinian groups which opposed the peace process with Israel, primarily Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. For Iran, the axis of resistance was meant to support three strategic objectives: Entrench Iran’s presence throughout an expanding regional sphere of influence, especially after the overthrow of the Ba’thist

regime in Iraq; increase its ability to exact a cost on America's allies in the region, primarily Israel and the Gulf states, as a means of deterrence; and claim for Tehran the political momentum in a way that reinforced its narrative as a champion of anti-imperialist forces against the pro-Western camp in the Middle East. The 2006 Lebanon war appeared to vindicate this strategy. Hezbollah's military confrontation with Israel elevated its political status in the region and served to undermine the political standing of pro-Western Arab regimes.

Iran's regional project thus presented a fundamental ideological and political challenge to the established Middle East order, one that it sought to further with the onset of the Arab uprisings. Iran would portray the uprisings as essentially an extension of the Islamic revolution, reflecting an aspiration that the overthrow of entrenched regimes — especially in Egypt — would pave the way for a political opening through which Iran could expand its political reach into the Arab world. The Arab uprisings, however, were not the breakthroughs that Iran had hoped for. Neither the parties of political Islam, nor the secular nationalist forces that contested their rise, would prove amenable to a strategic opening with Tehran.

In fact, the spread of the Arab Spring to Syria would confront Iran with a major strategic challenge to its regional policy, not only in terms of the threat it posed to its major Arab ally, but also because Tehran's support for the Assad regime challenged its political narrative of siding with the forces of popular revolution against autocratic governments. However, the potential installation of a new regime in Damascus inimical to Iranian interests would not only reinforce Iran's regional isolation, but also potentially tilt the regional balance of power to the anti-Iranian coalition led by Saudi Arabia. Intervention in Syria in support of the regime was thus perceived by Tehran as a geo-strategic, political and ideological imperative. Underpinning this strategic rationale was a maximalist security doctrine that essentially equated the survival of the Assad regime with the defence of the Islamic Republic itself.

But the Syria intervention exposed the limits of Iran's regional project. Irrespective of the defensive motives that guided Iranian policy, Tehran's intervention reflected regional expansionist aims that have proven to be inherently destabilising. The deployment of the Iranian regular military alongside the Quds force and the array of pro-Iranian Shiite militias has placed it along a path towards confrontation with Israel, and potentially, the United States. Moreover, the long-term viability of Iran's presence in Syria will be increasingly called into question in light of the re-imposition of sanctions by the United States and what appears to be growing domestic opposition in Iran itself to its regional adventurism in the midst of a burgeoning economic crisis.

Most importantly perhaps, Iran's strident regional intervention transformed its regional policy from one based on a political revolutionary project that once enjoyed considerable appeal in the Arab world to one with a narrow sectarian agenda. With the early defection of Hamas from the pro-Assad campaign, and its intervention on behalf of the Houthi rebellion in Yemen, the "axis of resistance" was reduced to a coalition of Shiite forces focused on the survival of the Syrian regime and the regional confrontation with Saudi Arabia, rather than resistance against Israel. Shorn of its ideological appeal, Iran's regional interventionism has thus devolved into a sectarian project reinforced by a geopolitical calculus focused solely on Iranian interests to the detriment of regional

stability. Neither the universal appeal of revolutionary pan-Islamism, nor the militant ideology of anti-Imperialism, would conceal the sectarian nature of Iran's regional project.

The Demise of the 'Turkish Model'

Turkey's challenge to the regional order would unfold in the context of a fundamental reorientation of Ankara's regional and security policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Before AKP's rise to power, the foreign policy tenets of the Turkish Republic were anchored firmly in the Western alliance, based primarily on Turkey's Nato membership and strategic partnership with Washington. As such, Turkey was not seen as a significant actor in the Middle East despite its proximity to the region and the historical legacy of its Ottoman past.

Under the auspices of then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's foreign policy witnessed a pronounced shift towards regional engagement, with the Arab world emerging as a central focus of Ankara's strategic outlook. This reorientation aimed to elevate Turkey's status to that of a major Muslim power able to shape regional politics through a proactive diplomatic agenda. Ankara's forward position on the Arab-Israeli conflict in defence of Palestinian rights, a strong mediation role in regional conflicts, and an emphasis on commerce, cultural exchange, and tourism in its regional ties were the cornerstones of the Iranian agenda.

More importantly, Ankara used the soft-power appeal of the "Turkish model" to project influence in the region. The "Turkish model" sought to project an image of a successful Muslim democracy espousing the principles of free market liberalism, a political outlook combining secularism with social conservatism, and the emergence of a vibrant entrepreneurial class that would spearhead the country's rise as a leading emerging economy.

Against this backdrop, the onset of the Arab uprisings was seen as a major strategic opportunity for Ankara. Turkey's brand of secular democratic Islamism was projected as a role model and moderating influence for the emerging forces of political Islam in the Arab world as they assumed the mantle of governance throughout the region following the overthrow of autocratic governments. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu, widely recognised as the architect of Turkey's foreign policy reorientation, would proclaim in 2012 that "we will be the owner, pioneer and servant of this new Middle East".²

However, the regional transformations that unfolded in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings would hamper Turkey's aspirations for regional leadership. In particular, two developments would combine to undermine the foundation upon which Ankara had based its regional vision. Contrary to its leadership's core strategic assumption that the Arab uprisings would portend the inexorable rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a natural political ally in the Arab world, the aftermath of the Arab uprisings would witness the demise of the Islamist political project. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war also presented Ankara with an acute security challenge. In addition to the burden posed by the influx of over three million refugees from Syrian and Iraq, Turkey now had to contend with an

² *Hurriyet Daily News*. 2012 "Turkey Owns, Leads, Serves the 'New Mideast' Davutoglu" July 9, 2012.

incipient Kurdish presence in northwest Syria that would drag Ankara deep into the vortex of the civil war there, a conflict over which it had little control.

Six years on from Mr Davutoglu's bold statement, Turkey would find itself not at the forefront of regional developments, but facing growing regional isolation. Its embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood created a deep rift with the key Arab states of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, one that would deepen as a result of Turkey's decision to host dissident members of the Brotherhood in Istanbul, from where they would continue their agitation against the new political order in Cairo.

The resulting setback for Turkey's regional policy would coincide with a transformation in Ankara's regional role, from an emphasis on soft power to project the "Turkish model" to a security-focused militarisation of its regional policy. Turkey's military interventions in Syria and Iraq, its expanding regional military footprint through the acquisition of bases in Qatar, Somalia, and off the Red Sea coast of Sudan, and Ankara's bellicose approach vis-à-vis Cyprus, Greece and Egypt in defence of its energy rights in the eastern Mediterranean were all reflective of this approach.

It was in Syria, however, that this more militarised Turkish policy would be most apparent. As the Syrian civil war dragged on, Turkey had to retreat from its avowed goal of regime change in order to focus on forestalling the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish enclave in northern Syria. This prompted Turkey's military intervention in the form of "Operation Euphrates Shield" in 2016, followed by "Operation Olive Branch" in early 2018 against the US-backed forces of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Not only did this draw Ankara into the complex geopolitics of the Syrian civil war, it also greatly complicated the US-led campaign against the Islamic State in northern Syria.

Turkey's military incursion in Iraq further entrenched this trend towards regional intervention. Ankara's decision in 2015 to establish a military base at Bashiqa, near Mosul — ostensibly to serve as a platform for confronting the Islamic State — would deeply antagonise the Iraqi government. Even after the liberation of Mosul in September 2017 and the withdrawal of Kurdish Peshmerga forces, its refusal to withdraw from Iraqi territory would prompt the Iraqi parliament to condemn Turkey's military presence as a "hostile occupation force".

In parallel with this marked militarisation of its regional policy, Turkey's response to the unfolding regional dynamics would witness the articulation of a regional political identity based on what came to be referred to as "neo-Ottomanism". In stark contrast to the traditional pillars of pro-Western secularism that underpinned the political identity of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottomanism implied a type of religious legitimacy as the foundation for a vaguely-defined notion of Turkish regional suzerainty. It also reflected an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the West, as evidenced in Ankara's contentious policy posture within Nato and its failed bid for EU membership. As expressed by President Erdogan, neo-Ottomanism was a major strategic re-evaluation of Turkish foreign policy, not simply in terms of a specific national interest, but of the country's overall historic role in the region, and indeed, globally. At times, this has veered into a latent irredentism. On more than one occasion, Mr Erdogan questioned the Treaty of Lausanne, which drew the boundaries of

the modern Turkish republic at the end of the First World War. This has been coupled with references to the vast expanse of territory that Turkey was forced to relinquish in the wake of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.

The distance that separates the original formulation of the “Turkish model” as an appealing framework for Ankara’s engagement with the Arab world from the “neo-Ottomanism” which harkens back to an imperial past is in many ways reflective of the degree to which Turkey’s challenge to the regional order has been undermined. Based as it is on a regional identity that increasingly veers towards grandiose notions of religious and historic legitimacy, Turkey’s bid for regional leadership is unlikely to find broad appeal beyond the few Sunni Islamist parties that relied on Ankara for support.

Turkey’s overt reliance on military intervention is similarly unlikely to translate into long-term regional influence. Unable to justify its regional military policy as being conducted for the benefit of regional peace or stability, Turkey’s military aims seem tied to narrow national objectives: The defence of Turkmens in Iraq; warding off the threat of Kurdish separatism in northern Syria; and upholding its energy rights in the eastern Mediterranean. Maintaining Turkey’s military presence in northern Syria relies primarily on Russian consent, and, to a certain extent, Iranian acquiescence. In addition, the antagonism engendered by Turkey’s interventionism on the part of the Assad regime and the Iraqi government will in all likelihood constitute a source for future conflict. Ensuring a long-term military presence in Turkey’s near abroad will thus prove to be as untenable as Turkey’s ambitious challenge to the regional order.

Transcending the Arab-Israeli Conflict?

Of the three principal non-Arab regional powers, Israel has had the most consequential and sustained impact on the regional order. The Arab-Israeli conflict has long constituted a defining feature of the modern Middle East, forming as it did the core axis of conflict in the region, and shaping the course of regional politics and regional security.

Since the establishment of the state of Israel, its perennial conflict with the Arab world has formed a barrier to its integration with its regional neighbourhood. As long as Israel continued to occupy Arab territory and forestalled the emergence of an independent Palestinian state, the prospect of normalising its relationship with the Arab world remained politically unachievable. The Arab world would continue to boycott Israel politically and economically, refusing to establish diplomatic relations even after the conclusion of peace treaties between the Jewish state and both Egypt and Jordan. This policy would eventually be formalised in the form of the Arab Peace Initiative unanimously adopted by all member states of the Arab League in 2002, which made normalisation with Israel conditional on the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital, and a just resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue.

Israel’s early response to this Arab posture was to cultivate a series of alliances with other regional non-Arab states, specifically Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia, to counterbalance what it perceived as an impregnable wall of Arab hostility — a strategy that became known as the “periphery doctrine” and

was associated in particular with Israel's founding Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. However, since the onset of the US-led peace process during the 1990s — predicated as it was on the twin tracks of direct Arab-Israeli negotiations and regional multilateral cooperation — Israel would espouse a regional project that had as its objective the establishment of political inroads into the Arab world itself, irrespective of the resolution of its conflict with the Palestinians.

The advent of the Arab uprisings would offer a potential window of opportunity to advance this project. Israel's initial response to the uprisings was cautious, assessing that intervening in the tangled regional politics of the region's emerging conflicts offered little prospect of shaping their outcome. Its approach was for the most part confined to warding off immediate security threats emanating from its proximate borders, particularly from the Syrian conflict, while at the same time agitating against the Obama Administration's nuclear diplomacy with Iran. With the Trump's Administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, much of Israel's focus would shift to countering Iran's growing military presence in southern Syria, a development that precipitated a major military flashpoint that periodically threatened to devolve into open armed conflict between Iran and Israel.

Beyond this immediate focus, however, Israel would assess that the shifts in the regional security landscape offered the tantalising prospect of building bridges to the Arab world — especially with the Gulf Arab states — unencumbered by the constraints imposed by the perpetuation of its occupation of Palestinian territories. The outbreak of the civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya seemed to eclipse the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as the central focus of regional politics, international diplomacy, and strategic competition. In parallel, the rise of Iran presented a common strategic challenge to both Israel and the Arab Gulf states, one that could potentially create a convergence of strategic interest against a mutual threat. The implicit assumption behind this approach was that Israel's capacity to project conventional military power on a regional scale would constitute a valuable asset that could be leveraged to forge an agenda of strategic cooperation with key Arab states, especially in the wake of the strategic uncertainty created by the shift in Washington's regional strategic posture. Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces Gadi Eisenkot would articulate this aspiration clearly in January 2017, when he stated Israel's readiness to “exchange information with the moderate Arab countries, including intelligence”, adding that “there is complete agreement between us and Saudi Arabia”.³

A number of regional developments would converge to indicate a cautious readiness on the part of certain Arab states to engage in such tacit cooperation with Israel, thus lending credence to the possibility of a gradual relaxation of the Arab world's long-standing anti-normalisation stance with the Jewish state. The ongoing anti-terrorism cooperation with Egypt and the agreements reached with both Egypt and Jordan for the sale of natural gas were the most visible manifestations of this cooperation. Media reports of numerous undisclosed contacts between Israeli and Gulf officials also proliferated. These were coupled with increasingly frequent statements from Gulf capitals that indicated a change of tone — if not of official position — towards Israel's status in the region. The most recent of these was expressed by Oman's Minister for Foreign Affairs Yusef bin Alawi, who stated in October 2018 that “Israel is a state present in the region, and we all understand this...and

³ Quoted in Moshe Ya'alon and Leehe Friedman “Israel and the Pragmatic Sunni Camp: A Historic Opportunity” *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 21, no. 2, July 2018. p. 17.

maybe it is time for Israel to be treated the same and also bear the same obligations”.⁴ This statement came one day after Oman hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on an official visit to Muscat. While this was not the first such visit by a high-level Israeli official to a Gulf capital, it gained special notoriety, given the anticipation that this might lead to a breakthrough in relations between Israel and a member of the GCC. More and more, the course of regional Arab interaction with Israel seemed to proceed independently of the Palestinian issue. Should this be taken to its logical conclusion – with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Gulf and Israel – it would constitute a major transformation of the regional order.

Yet, despite these outward steps from the Arab world, the expectation that Israel would be able to transcend its conflict with the Palestinians would prove unfounded. While the Palestinian issue may have been overshadowed by other regional conflicts, it remains a formidable barrier to the type of political normalisation, let alone strategic cooperation, envisaged by Israel. This was clearly on display in the Arab reaction to what appeared to be a concerted attempt by the Trump Administration to force a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would ostensibly pave the way for the establishment of normal relations with Israel. In response to the Administration’s decision to move the American Embassy to west Jerusalem and recognise it as Israel’s capital, Egypt led the charge at the United Nations reaffirming Jerusalem’s status as Arab-occupied territory, while Saudi Arabia would host a special Arab summit that would reaffirm Arab claims to the city as the capital of a future Palestinian state. These moves reflected a general Arab ambivalence to the Administration’s attempt to coerce the Palestinians into accepting a settlement that clearly violates the tenets of the two-state solution, and achieves little beyond the formalisation of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory. The repeated delays in announcing its much-anticipated “deal of the century” reflect a clear inability on the part of Washington to secure a modicum of regional consensus for its policy on the Palestinian issue.

Ultimately, however, Israel’s regional project to transcend the Palestinian issue ignores the reality that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is itself being transformed. In the absence of a negotiated settlement, the fundamental basis of the two-state solution has gradually eroded: The territorial basis of a solution has been severely undermined by Israel’s settlement project in the West Bank; while the political constituency on both sides for resolving the conflict has fractured as a result of the division in the Palestinian national movement between Fatah and Hamas, and the inexorable rightward drift of Israel’s domestic politics. As a result, the conflict is gradually being transformed into a one-state reality. In place of a two-state solution based on a resolution of the conflict between two competing nationalities – Israeli and Palestinian – what is emerging is an ethnic Jewish-Arab conflict in the entire territory of what comprised Mandatory Palestine, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean.

Israel’s regional project has always been predicated on the strategic assumption that the status quo of occupation could be sustained indefinitely, its conflict with the Palestinians could be regionally and internationally marginalised, and its resolution deferred for the long-term while it pursued its strategic objective of integration with its regional neighborhood. The degree to which the Arab-

⁴ “Oman Says Time to Accept Israel in the Region”, *Reuters* October 27, 2018.

Israeli conflict is undergoing transformation may ultimately prove this strategic assumption to be deeply flawed.

Conclusion: A Regional Order in Flux

The Middle East is undergoing a period of profound change brought about by the erosion of the fundamental pillars that have upheld the regional order for decades. The weakening of the Arab core and the shift in the role of the United States as the leading external power influencing regional politics means that the Middle East will be untethered from the political, strategic, and geopolitical moorings that have upheld that order. The underpinnings of regional order no doubt go beyond these two factors, which have been the focus of this paper. However, it is the erosion of these two pillars that have contributed most to the current state of regional security upheaval.

What has exacerbated this condition is the inability of any of the major regional or external powers to carve out a role that would compensate for the resulting loss of strategic certainty and provide the building blocs for an alternative regional order. While Russia has successfully positioned itself as a key power broker through its military intervention in Syria, it cannot emulate, let alone supplant, the US-led security system in the region. The divergence of interests between Russia, Iran and Turkey in Syria make the emergence of a coherent regional bloc between these countries an unlikely prospect. Furthermore, the security guarantees for regional allies, extensive defence cooperation, custodianship of the Arab-Israeli peace process, and regional military presence that had been the cornerstones of US policy are unlikely to be replaced by any single actor, or a potential coalition of actors.

Similarly, the diplomatic and military activism that has characterised much of Saudi Arabia's regional policy since the Arab uprisings has also failed to compensate for the erosion of the Arab core. The deep divisions that have plagued the Gulf Cooperation Council over fundamental issues of strategic relations with Iran, engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood, the conflict in Yemen, and the general course of the Arab uprisings – especially in Egypt – have rendered the GCC incapable of acting as a coherent regional bloc.

It is in this context that the regional role of the non-Arab periphery has gained greater salience. What distinguishes the regional policies of Iran, Turkey and Israel is that they have exceeded the search for strategic advantage within the “old” regional order. Rather, each of them has espoused a regional project that in many ways poses a fundamental challenge to that order. That challenge does not have as its aim the redrawing of the region's borders. Rather, the contest for regional order is centred on changing the rules and norms that govern the region's politics.

The nature of the non-Arab challenge has therefore been primarily political and ideational. Each of the three regional projects offers a regional framework that would replace the old “Arab” order: Iran's project of militant “resistance”, Turkey's brand of neo-Ottoman Islamism, and Israel's attempt to forge a cooperative security arrangement that contravenes the key tenets of Arabism, at the heart of which was the issue of Palestine. In doing so, these regional projects have sought to rewrite the rules of regional politics, and establish a new regional power hierarchy.

None of these projects, however, will succeed in their quest to reshape the region's politics. Eventually, the various attempts to reconfigure Middle East politics would confront the hard regional realities that hindered the emergence of an alternative regional order. The ideological makeup of the region will prove to be too diverse to impose any single ideational framework as the basis for regional identity. While the Arab core may have been weakened, this cannot negate the reality that a large swath of the region remains Arab. In many ways, this explains the transformation of the non-Arab challenge from a reliance on soft power ideational appeal to one that is increasingly dependent on hard military power. Stripped of their ideational cover, each of the non-Arab projects has devolved into a militarised regional policy in the service of a narrow national – or at times sectarian – interest, rather than a positive vision that would address the region's deep-seated conflicts.

Although unable to remake the Middle East order, the regional projects put forward by the non-Arab powers would constitute an inherently destabilising factor in regional politics. The reliance on an increasingly militarised regional policy has injected the non-Arab Middle East more deeply into the region's conflicts. Iran and Turkey are in many ways now parties to the conflict in Syria and Iraq, while Israel's policy threatens to undermine any prospect of reversing its occupation of Palestinian territory, in parallel with its role as a military protagonist in Syria against Iran.

Furthermore, the interventionism that has characterised the regional policy of each of the non-Arab actors will greatly undermine the task of post-conflict state building. Iran's attempt to entrench its influence in Syria through the integration of the Shi'ite militias fighting in support of the regime in the formal security structure of the state is a case in point. In doing so, Iran seeks to replicate the model that it had established in Iraq after the Islamic State was defeated. Not only will this perpetuate the condition of state weakness that has fuelled much of the conflict dynamic in the region, it can potentially enable the re-emergence of the Sunni insurgency that would give rise to a reincarnation of the Islamic State in a different guise. Turkey's interventions in northern Syria and Iraq are no less destabilising as they will likely constitute a source for future conflict, and undermine the prospects for a stable post-war outcome.

In a more fundamental sense, the current wave of interventionism has exerted a deeply destabilising effect through regionalising the Middle East's multiple conflicts. No longer confined to their immediate geographic arenas, these conflicts have become intertwined across the region by a complex web of linkages. The sectarian-based insurgency that propelled the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq spilled over into the civil war in Syria. Despite the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and its near collapse in Syria, the two conflict arenas remain linked through the entangling geopolitics of the Kurdish question - a dynamic that has drawn in Turkey - and the intervention of Iraqi Shi'ite armed groups acting as Iranian proxies in support of the Assad regime. Similarly, just as the Arab-Israeli conflict has since the 1970s spilled over into neighbouring Lebanon and Jordan (the Jordanian-Palestinian civil war of 1970), it is now merging with the conflict in Syria through Israel's frequent resort to military force and Hezbollah's intervention. And, of course, the geopolitical rivalry in the Gulf between Iran and Saudi Arabia has now extended to the conflict arenas of Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and, to a certain extent, Iraq.

With the pillars of the old order undermined and the inability of any external or regional actor or coalition of actors to forge an alternative one, the Middle East has now entered a period of tremendous flux. The question of regional order is unlikely to be settled in the near term: The cracks in the foundation of that order run deep, the challenge it faces from regional and external powers is acute, and the axes of conflict throughout the region have multiplied and become more entangled.

In the midst of this fluidity, two scenarios present themselves for the future course of regional politics. The first – and more dire – is one in which the Middle East heads further towards regional breakdown. The process by which the “old” order was undermined was set in motion by the cumulative “shocks” that have produced the current state of regional “disorder”: The US invasion of Iraq and, with it, the transformation of the Iraqi state; the resulting imbalance of regional power in favour of Iran; the creeping legitimacy crisis facing the Arab states in the lead up to the uprisings; and the escalating instability resulting from the uprisings themselves. The possibility that the current regional turmoil might deliver further shocks to the regional order remains possible. These include nuclearisation as a result of the collapse of the JCPOA; the formal denouement of the “two-state solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the dismemberment of one or more regional states, resulting in a trend towards Balkanization; the shift from proxy conflict to direct state-to-state conventional war – possible between Israel and Iran in Syria, especially in the wake of a possible withdrawal of US forces; and the outbreak of another iteration of the Arab uprisings. Any one or combination of such developments could potentially tip the Middle East from the current state of regional disorder to outright collapse.

The alternative scenario is stabilisation. This would not entail a reconstruction of regional order as such, which, given the immensity of the challenge, remains a distant prospect. Rather, such a scenario would envisage a concerted effort to contain the trend towards state collapse in such countries as Libya, Yemen and Syria, and the escalation of regional geopolitical competition. This would be coupled with the deft management of regional conflicts: First in order to disentangle the intertwined strands of conflict throughout the region, and then to institute a robust series of processes that can place these conflicts on a path towards a stable settlement. Finally, such a scenario would necessitate a vigorous and skillful diplomacy to reach a series of regional understandings – if not political accommodation – between the key regional actors. The objective would be to mitigate the intensity of the geopolitical competition that has exacerbated much of the region’s conflict environment, perhaps the most important being between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Crafting such a diplomatic and political agenda will be a formidable challenge for those with a stake in the outcome of the current contest for regional order in the Middle East.

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