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

*Edited By Galip Dalay & Tarik M. Yousef*



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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 el-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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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Hence, a few reflections on regional order are, well, in order.

While regional order should not be conflated with “orderly” relations,<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> in which "morbid phenomena" have appeared, as argued elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Alliances have become "liquid," as Soler i Lecha has put it,<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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"<sup>17</sup> 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,<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement may put an end to Yemen's catastrophic civil war,<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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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4. A region may be characterized by the absence of a hegemonic actor, conflictual relations between the main actors in the system, multiple wars, and/or frequent upheavals and revolutions. Such "unorderly" features would still define the order of that region. For a conception of regional order as "orderly" see for example Paul Salem, "The Middle East's Troubled Relationship with the Liberal International Order," *The International Spectator* 53, no. 1 (2018): 122–137, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1407165>; Mehran Kamrava, "Hierarchy and Instability in the Middle East Regional Order," *International Studies Journal* 14, no. 4 (2018): 1–35, [https://www.isjq.ir/article\\_89791\\_b0892459a65399d28e290b7a0ce8943f.pdf](https://www.isjq.ir/article_89791_b0892459a65399d28e290b7a0ce8943f.pdf).
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6. See for example Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
7. See for example Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1977); Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-cold War Era* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991); Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
8. See for example Louise Fawcett, "The Iraq War 20 Years on: Towards a New Regional Architecture," *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023): 567–585, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad002>.
9. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks. Volume II*, edited and translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Notebook 3, para. 34. According to Gramsci, "[t]he crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass."
10. Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig, and Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011," *MENARA Final Reports*, no. 1 (February 2019), [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_fr\\_1.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fr_1.pdf).
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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.
18. Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–1970*, 3rd ed., (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).
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