Protest against the government in Algeria, June 2019. Photo: Akechii (CC BY-SA 4.0)

In Search of a Regional Order: The Struggle over the Shape of the Middle East

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This article describes the regional architecture of the Middle East today using a systemic approach and employing terms like "regional order" in the sense of a dynamic structure rather than an organized, static arrangement. The central argument is that the defining feature of the regional order in the last decade has been a growing struggle over the shape of the Middle East, playing out on two levels: a clash between competing camps seeking to shape the contours and dominant features of the broader regional order, and a confrontation within the individual states between publics and governing elites (including, in some cases, militaries) over core economic, governance, and identity-related issues. The primary benefit of employing this epistemological and ontological approach is that it envisions the region as "whole" and thus permits a better understanding of the political behavior of its component parts, ultimately providing useful insights for policymakers.

Keywords: regional order, Arab Spring, Middle East, Iran

Introduction

Ten years after a series of uprisings swept the Middle East and North Africa, there is general agreement that the so-called Arab Spring and its aftermath severely disrupted, if not altogether overturned, a decades-long order characterizing the Middle East. Still, consensus remains elusive on precisely what has come in its place. Is it possible to discern a new Middle East order today? And if so, how does it differ from the order it presumably replaced? This article describes and analyzes the regional architecture of the contemporary Middle East, using a systemic approach to account for the complexities therein.

The defining feature of the regional order in the last decade has been a struggle over the shape of the Middle East.

We use terms such as "regional order," "regional architecture," and "regional system" interchangeably, in the sense of a dynamic structure rather than an organized, static arrangement. This order comprises "camps," "axes," or "blocs" of states and non-state actors that feature complex, dynamic associations both between and within them, including struggles and conflicts. The regional order we describe also comprises internal clashes within the states between leaders and their publics, stemming largely from pervasive longstanding fundamental problems in the region. In many ways the region seems to be branded by disorder rather than order. Still, without the conceptual framework we propose, the disorder would simply appear as chaos and preclude any understanding of key processes and developments in the region. The primary benefit of using this epistemological and ontological approach, therefore, is that it envisions the region as "whole" and thus permits a better understanding of the political behavior of its component parts, ultimately providing useful insights, including for policymakers.

Our central argument is that the defining feature of the regional order in the last decade has been a struggle over the shape of the Middle East, playing out on two levels: a battle between competing camps seeking to shape the contours and dominant features of the broader regional order, and a conflict within the individual states between publics and governing elites (including, in some cases, militaries) over core economic, governance, and identity-related issues.

The roots of the current regional order, from the emergence of some of the camps to the region's endemic economic and governance-related problems, pre-date the uprisings of 2011. Moreover, the upheaval of the last decade did not represent the first instance of mass protests in the region, and it was not the first time the old regional order came under threat. From the late 1960s onward, the regional order comprised states governed by strong, powerful leaders backed by militaries or other security apparatuses and capable of fending off threats to ensure basically smooth succession processes, occasional (and rarely free) elections, and a notion of citizens more akin to subjects of the regimes. The old regional architecture was one in which nation states were the dominant actors (as opposed to non-state entities or camps), trans-national ideas like pan-Arabism were weak (especially after Israel's victory in the 1967 Six Day War), and the regional agenda was largely dictated by the core Arab states of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.

From the late 1970s through the early years of the new millennium, this old order faced numerous challenges, beginning with the Iranian revolution of 1979, which both propelled the country onto a regional scene that until then was dominated by Arab states, and planted the seeds of a Sunni-Shia divide that would become a significant driver of developments thereafter (although the ongoing importance of the sectarian element in regional developments notwithstanding, the Sunni-Shia framework remains inadequate as a tool for understanding the broader regional order). Ensuing challenges

included Israel's peace agreement with Egypt (which in many ways removed the latter from the core Arab bloc), the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, the emergence of jihadists during the Soviet-Afghan war, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing United States military operation in 1990-1991, the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), which brought a more entrenched American presence to the region, and the removal of Saddam by the US—the first such instance in modern history of an outside military force bringing down an Arab leader in the Middle East.

What distinguished 2011 from these earlier challenges was the precedent-setting mass protests resulting in the ouster of leaders. Since then, events of the last decade have only sharpened the divisions between rival groups vying for regional hegemony and exacerbated the confrontation between publics and their leaderships, producing the struggle we describe as the principal feature of today's regional order.

We are aware that references to the Middle East as a "regional system" tend to disturb some scholars. Part of the discomfort stems from disciplinary differences; historians and area studies scholars may be less convinced by allusions to a regional system than their colleagues in the social sciences, for whom systemic approaches have been prevalent for decades in sub-fields like international relations. Some take issue with the notion that there is a cohesive "region" at all, given the diverse conditions across such a vast expanse of territory; for these skeptics, it makes more sense to talk about sub-regions like the Eastern Mediterranean or the Maghreb or the Gulf, rather than lump all three into one broad unit. While sub-regional blocs have certainly emerged, our contention is that the shared history (both real and imagined), combined with the linguistic, cultural, and religious linkages between populations in these countries, renders the greater Middle East more of an organic region rather than simply a collection of states in geographic proximity to one another (Erlich, 2003).

For others still, uneasiness about the idea of a "regional order" or a "regional architecture" stems from the assumption that the presumed order implies that developments therein must always be connected or unfold according to a single, unifying, internal logic. If anything, some have argued, the events of the last decade only reinforce the notion that the dominant feature of the Middle East today is not any kind of order but rather disorder, fragmentation, and chaos (Lynch, 2016). Our conceptualization of the regional "order" or "architecture" is not meant to suggest an inherent structure to the Middle East in the sense of an organized, institutional arrangement. Nor do we presume a uniformity of experience among the respective state populations, or even a fixed set of rules governing the behavior of the states in the region. On the contrary, in many cases the interactions, linkages, complex relationships, and contradictions between states, non-state entities, leaders, populations, and other actors of the region are messy, conflictual, and prone to change as circumstances dictate. Rather, we use these terms to refer to the patterns of relationships and interactions between states of the Middle East and North Africa, i.e., the layer of analysis residing above the individual states but below the international system.

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As Robert Jervis noted, "We are dealing with a system when (a) a set of units or elements is interconnected so that changes in some elements or their relations produce changes in other parts of the system, and (b) the entire system exhibits properties and behaviors that are different from those of the parts" (Jervis, 1997). The analytical usefulness of a systemic approach is apparent when we consider the uprisings of 2011. It would be possible to describe the discrete events of 2011 simply

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by referring to developments in the individual states, and perhaps occasionally linking those developments to dynamics at the international level, such as the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States. But since the defining characteristic of the upheaval was its sweep across the region, without a systemic approach focused on the level between the state and the international arena, we would have difficulty explaining why the self-immolation of a young man in a small Tunisian town proved to impact on the entire region. Similarly, when it comes to analyzing the events of the past decade and assessing the defining features of the region today—from the emergence of ISIS/Islamic State, to the rise of new leaderships, to the second wave of protests in 2019, to the recent normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states—a systemic approach offers the most useful analytical framework.

To the extent that scholars have sought to explain outcomes in the Middle East using such an approach, their works have generally fallen into four categories: studies testing out international relations theory (such as neo-realist assumptions about the anarchic nature of the international system, or constructivist approaches emphasizing the role of ideas and ideology) on Middle East cases (Binder, 1958; Walt, 1987; Rubin, 2014); a strand of scholarship explaining events in the Middle East with reference to developments in the international system (Barnett, 1998; Said Aly et al., 2013); a literature exploring the post-Cold War growth in regional institutions around the world, including in the Middle East (Hurrell, 1995; Fawcett & Hurrell, 1995); and works outlining the features of a Middle East regional system and explaining changes therein (Gause, 1999; Hinnebusch, 2013; Krasna, 2019).

We build on the latter category, including the efforts of scholars such as F. Gregory Gause III and Raymond Hinnebusch to define the Middle East regional system with reference to its anarchic nature, its multipolar distribution of power among the states, the evolving relationship between state and society, and the tensions between state sovereignty and transnational identities that have long characterized the region (Gause, 1999; Hinnebusch, 2013). Our conceptualization of the struggle constituting the regional system today incorporates elements from their work. The model of competing camps vying for regional hegemony, for example, presumes an inherently anarchic structure and an increasingly multipolar landscape, while the ongoing confrontation between governing elites (whether civilian or military) and their publics stems from longstanding economic challenges, identity-related conflicts, and evolving state-society relations more generally, all of which feature prominently in the works of these scholars.

Still, our thesis departs from previous analyses in several respects. Since Malcolm Kerr's classic study asserting an "Arab Cold War," a sizable literature has emerged on the evolving power struggles and rivalries between regional blocs and individual states of the Middle East over the years. But our central contention—that the regional system today is characterized by an overarching struggle, comprising both an ongoing battle between clusters of actors and a confrontation between governments and publics within the states—is novel, as far as we know. And since we argue that this struggle forms the core dynamic of the regional order, the borders we delineate are more inclusive, because the states implicated in that broader struggle extend from Morocco to Iran and from Turkey to Yemen. It is our hope that such a conceptualization contributes to the ongoing scholarly and policy debates surrounding the current Middle East. In the sections that follow, we briefly recap the key developments of the last decade, examine the two main realms of the ongoing struggle over the shape of the region, and conclude with some reflections

on alternative approaches to understanding the regional system today.

A Decade of Unrest

The mass mobilization of Arab publics in 2011 and the subsequent departure of rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen represented a profound break from the historical norm of a region that until then had appeared largely (though not entirely) immune to the kind of social unrest and popular upheaval capable of overturning regimes. The basic chronology is by now well known. Most assessments point to the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in December of 2010 and the ensuing protests in the small North African country as the proximate trigger of what ultimately morphed into a region-wide surge of unrest. Bouazizi's economic distress, coupled with the abuse he suffered at the hands of corrupt police officers, unleashed a wave of demonstrations that succeeded in ousting Tunisia's longtime autocratic President, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The remainder of 2011 saw similarly inspired mass demonstrations across the region calling for political liberalization, jobs, and an end to corruption. By early 2012, four Arab rulers in power for decades had been ousted.

In their place, movements and political parties linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) began capitalizing on their longstanding grassroots presence and organizational superiority to ascend to power in key capitals across the region. While Islamist electoral victories in places like Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco hinted at a new emerging order, the inability of these parties to build broad-based coalitions and provide compelling solutions to the region's ills ultimately elicited a backlash against political Islam that in many respects continues to this day. The coup in Egypt that toppled Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and brought the military general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi into the presidential palace would prove emblematic of the MB's demise in the years to follow.

As the MB struggled to retain its relevance, a more radical variant of Sunni Islamism emerged in 2014 in the form of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which distinguished itself from al-Qaeda and demanded the restoration of an Islamic caliphate. By mid-2015 the jihadist organization had captured a substantial swath of territory extending from Syria's northwestern border with Turkey as far east as Mosul and Fallujah in Iraq. In part due to the stunning success of ISIS, the years 2015 and 2016 came to be marked by growing international involvement in the region, reflected most prominently in Russia's intervention in the Syrian war and the US-led military coalition aimed at beating back and containing IS's spread. Both endeavors succeeded insofar as Bashar al-Assad, while failing to reassert control over all of Syrian territory, nonetheless retained his position thanks to Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah assistance, and ISIS's territorial gains were largely reversed by late 2018.

With the threat of ISIS all but removed, populations could shift their focus once again to the endemic problems confronting them closer to home, and the result was a new round of protests across the region, this time originating in Sudan and Algeria, and extending to Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt (albeit on a smaller scale), and even Iran. The "second wave" of 2019 managed to unseat long-serving autocrats in Algiers and Khartoum, and ultimately brought down prime ministers in Baghdad and Beirut, while destabilizing Tehran. The COVID-19 crisis of 2020 suspended many of the region's protests, providing a respite for regimes struggling to contain popular opposition. But the core economic, social, and governance-related problems propelling Tunisians into the streets after Bouazizi's death a decade ago have remained in place or worsened, suggesting that whatever relative calm the pandemic may have imposed on the region will likely prove temporary.

The final significant development of the decade was the series of normalization agreements reached between Israel and the

United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, respectively, in 2020. Beyond the proximate triggers fueling these agreements—the specter of Israel's annexation of territory in the West Bank, combined with these countries' wish to extract as much as possible from an outgoing Trump administration—the growing ties between Israel and these Arab states reflect key elements of the broader struggle fueling the regional system in the last decade.

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The Battle between the Camps

The first nexus of the struggle is a deep rivalry between competing camps fighting for power and influence, and motivated by clashing ideologies and conflicting worldviews in their drive to define the contours of the regional order. These groupings, which can also be referred to as "axes" or "blocs," consist of state and non-state actors that share a basic outlook on the kind of regional order they would like to see. This common stance does not always translate into unified, coordinated policies among members of a given camp. Moreover, sometimes there are rivalries and disputes within the blocs concerning various and even critical issues. Still, what distinguishes the blocs from one another is their diverging stances on a number of core issues, including relations with the West (and in some cases, Israel), Iran's aspirations in the region, the integrity of the sovereign nation state as the basic unit of the system, political Islam, and sectarianism. With one exception, these camps existed prior to the 2011 uprisings, but over the last decade they have crystallized further as developments exposed and deepened the divisions between them.

Three clarifications about the camps are in order. First, the notion of a "camp" reflects both an ontological reality and an epistemological argument. The connections between, and dynamics within, the groupings we identify as "camps" actually exist, so from this standpoint we are not inventing anything. The downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the rise of President Sisi in 2013 prompted the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait to inject billions of dollars into Cairo's Central Bank. In 2017, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi led a GCC-wide boycott of Qatar, partly due to the latter's support of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qasem Soleimani, prior to his assassination in early January 2020, was the commander of Iran's IRGC Quds Force, the organization responsible for translating Iran's regional policy into operations on the ground. As such, he was a frequent visitor in Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad, where he synchronized and coordinated the activities of axis members and proxies, including Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis. In late 2019, the Turkish foreign minister and the Prime Minister of the internationally recognized Libyan government met in Doha, and six months later the Turkish and Qatari defense ministers visited Tripoli. These examples speak to the ontological basis for the groups we have identified.

At the same time, the actors within these camps do not usually refer to themselves as such—though in some cases they do, as when Hezbollah speaks of "the resistance axis" or when elites in the UAE refer to the Sunni pragmatic states and Israel as a "bloc of progress and development." In this respect, the "camps" reflect an epistemological tool that both decision makers and analysts can approach as an analytical framework to help make sense of developments in the region.

Second, the classification of these camps is not meant to suggest that their competing visions of a regional order constitute the only, or even in some cases the primary, factor motivating their actions. Middle East leaders,

like leaders everywhere, are primarily motivated by their self-interest, and considerations of realpolitik always accompany ideological preferences in the formulation of policy. The competing visions of a Middle East order reflected in the respective camps help to explain the logic governing actors' determinations of both what constitutes and what will best serve those interests. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan intervenes in Libya's civil war partly to secure economic gains and extend Turkish influence across the Mediterranean, but his choice of which side to back in seeking those gains also reflects his preference for Islamists partial to the MB. The model of the camps helps to account for such developments.

Third, the competing camps are not only distinct from one another; they also differ in kind. One camp is a consortium comprising a regional power, several non-state organizations, and a state, organized in a relatively coherent fashion akin to a board of directors. A second camp blends an ideology, several states, and various political parties dotting the regional landscape. A third camp does not consist of states but rather a group of organizations linked by ideology but hostile to each other and sometimes diverging in their visions. And a fourth camp is a group of states sharing a broadly pro-Western orientation but otherwise united primarily by the states and ideologies they collectively oppose. The different nature of each grouping helps to account for their distinct approaches in seeking to shape the regional order.

The first camp, which we refer to as the "Iran-led axis"—and which is sometimes referred to by its own members as "the resistance axis" and by others as "the radical Shiite axis"—comprises Iran and its mostly Shiite allies and proxies across the region, including various militias in Iraq, Bashar al-Assad's Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Houthis in Yemen can also be included in this grouping, as can Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza, despite the latter's Sunni identity. This camp, whose roots stretch back to the Iranian revolution in 1979, is anti-Western in its orientation, revisionist insofar as it is not wedded to the sanctity of state borders across the region, and relatively aggressive in deploying military tools to achieve its aims.

The last decade has been alternately kind and frustrating to the Iran-led axis. Tehran initially misread the events of 2011, calculating that mass numbers of citizens taking to the streets across the region would serve its interests in undermining conservative Arab regimes and providing an opening for the ascendance of Islamist (albeit Sunni) popular movements. But when those protests began to implicate Assad in Syria, Iran felt itself under attack, insofar as Assad's downfall would have threatened to fell the entire camp. Iran, along with its partners in Hezbollah and various additional Shiite militias, took upon itself the task of saving Bashar's regime, and when it succeeded in doing so, began to entrench itself further in Syria. This deepening Iranian entrenchment in turn prompted Israel to launch a military campaign aimed at preventing any such permanent outcome. Indeed, Israel's emergence as a major regional power in the last decades has constituted a serious challenge to the Iran-led axis; more recently, the camp has had to contend with Soleimani's killing, the COVID-19 crisis, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, and the fatal attack on Iran's chief nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in 2020. And yet, Iran's regional footprint remains quite intact, bolstered all the more so by the defeat of ISIS and the opening that enabled Tehran to extend its influence deeper into Iraq. Bashar has held onto Syria (fragmented though it may be), and Hezbollah, while facing serious challenges, nonetheless remains the leading political force in Lebanon today. Among the four camps described here, the Iran-led axis is the most cohesive, although it appears the camp is struggling to find a replacement for Soleimani equally capable of synchronizing the activities of Iran's proxies throughout the region.

The second camp comprises the Sunni states, movements, and political parties connected by their shared sympathy for the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. The MB and its ideology have existed since the 1920s, and in certain places—such as Turkey in 2002 or Gaza in 2006—derivative movements moved into positions of political power before the onset of the upheaval. But 2011 provided MB sympathizers an opportunity to transform themselves from an assortment of mostly banned or moderately tolerated opposition groups into formidable actors exercising *state* power. The election of Mohamed Morsi, head of Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party, to the presidency in 2012 embodied this rise, but the Brotherhood's time in power was ultimately cut short following the counter-coup in 2013. Morsi's arrest and the Sisi regime's broader crackdown on elements of the Brotherhood had severe repercussions for Brotherhood affiliates across the region, even as the movement's mantra that "Islam is the solution" continues to garner support in the Middle East.

The camp today is led by Turkey and includes the regime in Qatar, Hamas in Gaza, and the handful of Islamist political parties across the region, such as Tunisia's Ennahda party, Jordan's Islamic Action Front, and Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement. Common ideology notwithstanding, promotion of political Islam is not the only or in some cases even the dominant rationale motivating the behavior of these actors; rather, support for the MB remains a part of their self-legitimating strategies and helps to explain their regional alliances.

The deterioration of talks aimed at facilitating Turkey's accession to the European Union gave Erdogan additional incentive to shift his focus eastward, and in seeking to extend Turkish influence across the Middle East, he has increasingly burnished his Islamist credentials. The ideas and proponents of the MB continue to be perceived warily by the Iran-led camp and as a major threat by the Sunni pragmatic camp. The latter's disdain for political Islam was apparent in the recent decision by the post-Bashir government in Sudan to revoke the citizenships of Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal and the head of Tunisia's Ennahda party, Rached Ghannouchi.

A third camp comprises the remnants of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and affiliated jihadist movements across the region that, though connected by a shared ideology, are often hostile to each another and differ in their visions and tactics. In contrast to the three other groupings described here, the jihadist camp did not exist as such prior to 2011, and even today its designation as a "camp" reflects an analytical distinction rather than any self-identification or observable cooperation between the component groups. Until then, the leading jihadist organization, al-Qaeda, had generally promoted three narratives: the predominant, global narrative, advanced by Osama bin Laden and focused on undermining Western regimes (for example, September 11, 2001); a regional narrative reflected in the works of Ayman al-Zawahiri, prioritizing defeat of "the near enemy" among Middle East regimes the group deemed *kufar* (infidels); and an initial Palestinian version represented by Abdullah Azzam but ultimately marginalized after he was killed in 1989. With bin Laden's death at the hands of American special forces in 2011, Zawahiri's assumption of leadership over the organization brought the regional story to greater prominence, and the power vacuums created by the upheaval that year (especially in places like the Sinai Peninsula and Syria) brought widely dispersed jihadist forces to the region and ultimately provided an opening for a new, regionally oriented jihadist organization—ISIS (Daesh). Organizational rivalries and deep disagreements over whether to prioritize establishment of an Islamic state eventually undermined the cohesiveness of this camp, and ISIS and others have continued to perceive each other as threats rather than allies, despite the groups' shared ideological commitments to an anti-Western, revisionist, and deeply sectarian

regional order. More recently, the camp has suffered a number of powerful blows, chief among them the territorial defeat of ISIS and the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019. Still, pockets of the camp continue to operate across the region, and Salafi-jihadist ideas remain very much in circulation.

The last camp is perhaps the least cohesive of the four, consisting of the Sunni Arab states that have coalesced—in rhetoric and intention, if not always in practice—around the goals of countering Iranian influence across the Middle East, diminishing the sway of the MB and derivative Islamist movements that were on the rise after 2011, and countering jihadist extremism. These countries are usually referred to as "moderate" or "pragmatic" because of their generally positive ties to the West, their belief in the primacy of sovereign nation states over any transnational entity or identity, and their relative openness to Israel's presence in the neighborhood. Of all the camps, this was ostensibly the most comfortable with the pre-2011 order, and thus it experienced the upheaval, especially the emergence of publics as politically salient actors, as a trauma. Perhaps because the last decade has fundamentally undermined an order that by and large served them well, leaders in this camp—which today includes Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, and Morocco—have tended to articulate their interests less in terms of what they seek to promote and more in terms of what they oppose, e.g., extremism, instability, Iranian expansionism, and political Islam.

Additionally, the very pragmatism of this camp has meant that the states therein tend to form ad hoc alliances based on immediate threat perceptions and available capabilities rather than longer-term strategic goals and shared geopolitical orientations when making foreign policy decisions. And although they share a desire to contain the twin threats of Iranian expansionism and MB-style Islamism, they differ in their prioritization of these challenges. For example, whereas Morocco initially sent troops to support the Saudi-UAE campaign in Yemen, the kingdom on the western edge of the Arab world also took a neutral stance in the rift between Qatar and its Gulf rivals to avoid antagonizing its patrons in Doha. In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Egypt prioritizes the fight against the MB over the containment of Iran; hence Cairo's decision in 2019 to pull out of the anti-Iranian "Arab NATO" initiative. Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed is less keen than his protégé in Riyadh, Mohammed bin Salman, to antagonize Tehran, which helps to explain the UAE's decision to withdraw from the Saudi-UAE military alliance in Yemen (despite the fact that both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh view a Houthi ascendance there as a Trojan horse for Iranian influence) and the more recent Emirati rhetoric singling out Turkey as a threat of equal, if not greater, magnitude as Iran. The result of such developments is that the Sunni pragmatic camp has had difficulty both countering Iran and snuffing out the remaining embers of political Islam.

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The struggle between the camps described above has been reflected in numerous developments on the ground in countries across the region. Perhaps the most glaring example has been Syria, where what began as a series of domestic protests in 2011 morphed into a civil war in which nearly every major regional and international actor at one time or another became involved. In this sense, the Syrian theater became "Exhibit A" of the broader struggle over a regional order, with the Iranian-led camp (bolstered by Russian assistance) resisting jihadists and MB elements to preserve Assad's position; rebel groups briefly receiving support from the Sunni pragmatic camp; and Turkey establishing a zone of control along

the border between the two countries. But the battle between the regional camps was also evident elsewhere. Consider Libya, where members of the pragmatic camp (principally Egypt and the UAE) have been pitted against representatives of the MB camp (Turkey and, in the background, Qatar) as both seek to mold the emerging Libyan order in a way that advances their interests, and where the jihadist camp also briefly appeared ascendant throughout 2015-2016, when IS commanded its largest province there outside the central territory of Iraq and Syria. In Yemen, the Iranian axis has lent at least indirect support to the Houthis in their struggle against groups allied with the Sunni pragmatic camp, while jihadists affiliated with al-Qaeda remain a severe threat. And in Iraq, where the Iranian camp has leveraged its role in beating back the IS jihadists to extend its own influence in the political realm, Saudi Arabia and others in the pragmatic camp have recently re-established a diplomatic presence in Baghdad, presumably in part to undermine Iran's ambitions there.

The rivalry between the camps has also been reflected in emerging blocs of alliances across the region. One glaring example in recent years has been in the Eastern Mediterranean, where what began as a local scramble for access to natural gas and a dispute over maritime borders morphed into an increasingly hostile confrontation between Turkey (and, in the background, Qatar) on one side and an alliance between Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the UAE on the other. Originally, the tensions between countries along the Eastern Mediterranean basin were locally driven, but over time both Erdogan's growing assertiveness and the UAE's subsequent desire to check Turkish (read: MB) ambitions have increasingly implicated the Eastern Mediterranean in the broader struggle for influence between various Middle East camps.

A final point concerns where Israel and the Palestinians figure among the camps. In the last decade, Israel has solidified its standing as an ally of the Sunni pragmatic camp, evidenced by its military campaign to frustrate Iran's entrenchment in Syria, its quiet military assistance to Egypt in Sinai, and its widely presumed, if until now largely covert, security cooperation with the various Gulf states that share the perception of a threat emanating from Tehran. The recent normalization (peace) agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco exemplified the trend. And while it is too early to assess the success of the agreements, it is reasonable to assume that to the extent that normalization strengthens the pragmatic Sunni/Israeli camp, it will likely deepen regional divisions between the pragmatists and the Islamists on the one hand, and between the pragmatic and Iran-led camps on the other.

For their part, the Palestinians, much like their governments, have been split in their regional alignment. Since 2011, Hamas has developed a clearer regional position within the Sunni Islamist bloc (having previously been more closely associated with the Iranian-led axis), and thus the organization has enjoyed a greater degree of regional sponsorship from Qatar and Turkey, even as it occasionally continues to flirt with Iran. The Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, by contrast, cannot really claim to belong to any camp today, reflecting a certain failure on Ramallah's part to devise a regional strategy that might have positioned it more advantageously vis-à-vis Israel. However, the PA finds itself increasingly isolated, notwithstanding occasional statements of support by Arab leaders and ongoing public sympathy across the region for the Palestinian cause. Whereas much of the vitality of the Palestinian cause traditionally came from the region, the shifting fault lines over the past decade—and especially what is perceived as the reduced urgency of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—have left the Palestinians under the PA without a clear regional stance, and thus at a significant disadvantage.

The Conflict within the States

The second locus of the broader struggle is within the states. There, regimes—particularly political leaders, elites, and the militaries or other security apparatuses that continue to be bastions for their survival—are confronting frustrated, disillusioned publics and striving to contain domestic instability arising from endemic economic and social problems. These include unemployment, corruption, inequality, and an over-reliance on hydrocarbon sales or foreign aid, as well as identity-related pressures in the form of tribal clashes, sectarian schisms, and the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities.

Moreover, by the time the uprisings erupted in 2011, the traditional social contract prevalent throughout the region—whereby the state provided citizens with jobs, education, and security, extracted relatively little in the way of taxes, but also protected and often gave preferential treatment to business elites and the security sector—had been gradually dissipating over the course of several decades, due to the convergence of demographic trends and deficiencies in governance. Already by the early 2000s, for example, the Middle East's younger population and the percentage of those youth who were unemployed were among the highest in the world; both turned out to be key drivers of the unrest in late 2010-early 2011 (Kabbani, 2019).

In the ensuing decade, slowed economic growth—whether due to instability, war, or the breakdown of basic state institutions—sent unemployment levels even higher, such that on the eve of the COVID-19 outbreak, two-thirds of the region's population was under the age of 35 and youth unemployment stood at 25 percent (World Bank, 2020). Poverty also increased markedly during this period (even in oil-producing states where the cushion of hydrocarbon revenues should have presumably mitigated this eventuality), and the region continues to boast the highest levels of income inequality in the world. In Yemen, Libya, and Syria, the combination of such prevalent problems and war have led them to become failed states. Beyond the economic realm, the decade saw an eruption of longstanding identity-related tensions, including new expressions of the Sunni-Shiite schism, as in the battles between the Islamic State and pro-Iranian Shiite militias; the persecution of minorities, as in the massacre of the Yazidis in 2014; and tribal clashes, featuring prominently, for example, in the Libyan war. Thus while the economic problems and identity-related points of contention were long in the making by 2011, the uprisings fundamentally upset the internal order of these states by introducing the element of mobilized publics as key political actors into the equation.

The second locus of the broader struggle is within the states. There, regimes—particularly political leaders, elites, and the militaries or other security apparatuses—are confronting frustrated, disillusioned publics and striving to contain domestic instability arising from endemic economic and social problems.

The second wave of protests throughout 2019 suggests that the region's publics for the most part were undeterred from taking to the streets against the backdrop of ongoing problems that have remained in place, if not worsened. Even Tunisia, the region's lone (relative) success story of the past decade, has seen growing unrest in recent years as successive governments appear unable to tackle the deep structural problems that fueled the original 2010-2011 protests. And in countries where the post-2011 regimes have managed to suppress additional protests, leaders and governments know they face a persistent threat of galvanized publics demanding their ouster. In this regard, the onset of the coronavirus crisis in early 2020 created a paradox. On the one hand, fear of contagion forced protesters to stay home, thereby offering regimes a measure

of relief, a chance to consolidate their power, and an opportunity to prepare (and perhaps even preempt) future bouts of unrest. On the other hand, to the extent the economic impact of the virus exacerbated the region's core problems that fomented opposition to regimes and undermined stability in the first place, the pandemic has likely increased the chances of future unrest.

Algeria illustrates this paradox nicely. There, a year-long protest movement managed to bring down the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 2019 but was forced to suspend its demonstrations when COVID struck, offering Bouteflika's successor a chance to consolidate his power even as the public largely continues to view him as illegitimate. But if the pandemic enabled the regime of Abdelmejjid Tebboune to chase high-profile protest leaders and other perceived threats in civil society, it also sped up the economic deterioration Algeria faced prior to the pandemic, thereby making it more likely that Tebboune's government will confront the prospect of a failing state even sooner.

The heightened degree to which leaders today are preoccupied with domestic sources of opposition explains both why they have resorted to higher levels of political repression at home, and why they have pursued interventions abroad, partly to prevent outside actors from mobilizing like-minded movements within their borders, and in some instances to divert domestic discontent to international issues. Consider, for example, Turkey's military intervention in Syria and Ankara's determination to carve out a territory under its control along the northern Syrian border, aimed in part at preventing the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish enclave to its south, which could inspire secessionist tendencies among Turkey's own Kurdish population. Or take Egypt's intervention in Libya, which aims partly to prevent instability there from spilling over into its territory and partly to prevent Libyan actors sympathetic to the MB from emerging in a dominant position. From Cairo's perspective, such an outcome could potentially embolden like-minded Islamists in Egypt, where the regime has cracked down severely on nearly all forms of protest and political activity.

Points of Contact

Although the two levels of the regional struggle generally exist separate from one another, there is a key dynamic linking the clashes within the states to the battle between the competing camps. The heightened sense of insecurity among leaders, stemming in part from domestic opposition, has increased their tendency to intervene in areas beyond their borders, undermining the sovereignty of states and in many cases further fueling the conflict between rival camps (Lynch, 2018). Thus even if states in the region have largely retained their borders (defying earlier predictions of "an end to Sykes-Picot," the 1916 agreement between Britain and France delineating state borders across the Middle East), the sovereignty many regimes are able to exercise is limited. For a number of regimes across the region, sovereignty is *constrained*, in the sense of geographically limited, and *contested*, insofar as leaders face continuous domestic and external challengers (Sayigh, 2018; Valensi & Michael, 2021).

Consider the case of Egypt, where widespread public dissatisfaction with Mohamed Morsi's governance ultimately led a million citizens into the streets of Cairo in July 2013 demanding his ouster, prompting the army and allied factions to carry it out. It is doubtful Abdel Fattah el-Sisi would have survived as Morsi's successor absent the financial assistance he received over the next eighteen months from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, all of which saw a Sisi presidency as a means of checking the MB's rise across the region. Or take the example of Sudan, where in 2017 Islamist political elites convinced their longtime President, Omar al-Bashir, to maintain relations with Qatar even after the Gulf rift exploded that summer. The move antagonized Bashir's patrons in the UAE, who had demanded he reduce the influence of

Islamists at home and consequently went on to abandon him in the face of mass protests calling for his ouster two years later, effectively facilitating his overthrow.

For their part, the protesters in Iraq and Lebanon throughout 2019 understood well that Iranian encroachment in their domestic affairs had become directly entangled with, and to some extent responsible for, the political dysfunction undermining good governance and the provision of basic services. Indeed, in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, foreign-backed security forces vie with remnants of regular armed forces and sub-state paramilitary units for control over territory, leaving governments struggling to assert full sovereignty over their countries and further undermining their ability to address the myriad economic and social problems facing these societies.

Where Are We? Alternative Approaches to Understanding the Regional System

In this concluding discussion, we return to the original question we posed, namely: what has replaced the pre-2011 order? In the evolving discourse on the post-Spring landscape, three general approaches to understanding the Middle East have emerged. The first posits that the regional system has settled into a new, relatively stable order, which is fundamentally different from the one it replaced in 2011. A second approach contends that the Middle East has returned to its pre-2011 order and will remain there for the foreseeable future. A third approach maintains that the region is still in a period of transition, has not yet settled into any order, and in the coming years will be characterized by uncertainty, instability, and volatility. The first two approaches are supported in some measure by the current regional landscape, but they fail to provide an overarching framework for understanding regional trends today. This article has advanced the third approach, which we believe provides a more comprehensive understanding of the region. At the heart of this approach lies the struggle we have identified over the shape of the Middle East.

Governments are struggling to assert full sovereignty over their countries, and their ability to address the myriad economic and social problems is undermined.

A New Order for the Middle East?

Those who subscribe to the idea that the region has settled into a new order point to several features of the contemporary region, including the shifting regional balance of power, the unprecedented political salience of publics, and the evolving configuration of Great Power involvement in the region. The turmoil has undercut the traditional dominance of Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, while other (notably, non-Arab) actors—chiefly Iran, Israel, and Turkey—have used the turbulence to expand their already salient regional influence. Iran today enjoys a much stronger military and political presence in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq than in the past. Israel has broadened its regional influence through bolstered security and intelligence cooperation with Jordan and Egypt, and recently through normalization agreements with some of the Gulf states—developments enabled, inter alia, by the downgrading of the Palestinian issue on the list of these countries' priorities. In addition, Turkey has asserted its regional influence more aggressively in the last several years than perhaps in any other period since the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

At the same time, although states and borders remain the region's organizing principles, many countries have had to resign themselves to limited sovereignty, reflected in the emergence of chaotic, contested, and ungoverned zones on their frontiers, the ascendance of militias and other non-state entities, and the need to share control over territory with other actors.

The Iraqi state, for example, may have survived the ISIS onslaught, but its central government remains weak compared to sub-state actors operating on its territory, and it is subject to heavy Iranian influence. In Egypt, the upheaval may not have ultimately overturned the military regime in place since 1952, but the post-2013 regime has struggled to impose its authority over the Sinai Peninsula. Bashar managed to retain sovereignty over segments of Syrian territory, but much of the state remains in the control of non-state actors, and both Russia and Iran continue to operate on Syrian territory, whether directly or via proxies.

Meanwhile, the Middle East has shifted from a regional system characterized, at least since the 1990s, by the dominance of a sole superpower (the US) to a system contending with competition and rivalry between several world powers (the US, Russia, and China). Through its presence in Syria in recent years, for example, Russia has secured its role as a superpower in the Middle East alongside the US, which has continued its gradual withdrawal from the region, and to a lesser degree, China. Between the US and Russia, a division of spheres of influence has emerged, with the US preserving its dominance in the Gulf, and Russia reviving its influence in the Fertile Crescent and, to some extent, in North Africa.

The Middle East will remain prone to additional unrest, instability, and considerable uncertainty.

A Return to the Old Order?

Alternatively, it is possible to survey the region today and conclude that despite the tumult of the past decade, parts of the Middle East have retained the predominant characteristics of the pre-2011 order. According to this approach, the region still comprises the same countries, which, with some exceptions, have not undergone a significant internal reordering of the power structure long defining their regimes. Instead, the post-2011 regimes, whether holdovers from the earlier period or new arrivals since the uprisings, have met and adjusted to the challenges of the period in a manner that will likely permit them to retain power.

Likewise, notwithstanding the demands of protestors in 2011 (and, to a lesser extent, 2019) for individual rights and social justice, the last decade has not installed a fundamentally different political culture in the region. Countries of the Middle East continue to be characterized by authoritarian rulers, close links between wealth and power, bloated national bureaucracies, deep involvement by the military and state security system in politics and the economy, and religion's centrality in public and private life. Sisi in Egypt resembles Mubarak before him; Bashar al-Assad remains in Syria; and the monarchies stand intact. Fundamental problems may persist, but the region's leaders are more aware than before of the potential threat disaffected citizens pose to their rule, and they believe their policies have managed to contend with the challenges and will continue to do so.

Continuing Upheaval in the Middle East

Although there are remnants of the old order and hints of a new order, our argument about a fundamental struggle characterizing the region reflects the third approach, which maintains that the collapse of the pre-2011 order has not produced a new one in the Middle East, nor has the region returned to the old order. Rather, even as there are elements of a new order alongside islands of the old, the region remains in a protracted period of transition, as competing camps continue to fight for dominance and the outcome remains undecided. The Middle East will, therefore, remain prone to additional unrest, instability, and considerable uncertainty.

Although the borders of the region have remained intact, the countries within those borders have undergone significant changes over the last decade. And while many regimes have survived, leaders are more conscious of the publics and, hence, more aware of their own

vulnerability relative to the pre-2011 period. The notion of an ongoing upheaval is bolstered by the fact that the region's fundamental economic deficiencies (e.g., youth unemployment, corruption, shadow economies, socio-economic inequality, and a crippling dependency on oil) and its identity struggles (whether religious, ethnic, or tribal) have not been resolved, and in many respects they have worsened since 2011, all the more so in light of the pandemic. Absent a solution, these problems will continue to fuel increasingly divergent expectations between regimes and publics, a dynamic that is liable to spark future waves of popular protest and/or migration from the region, which could bring equally destabilizing results.

Moreover, persistent struggles over political authority rage on, both within countries and between the various camps. Violence continues in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, where full political sovereignty remains elusive. Despite what has long been a looming victory in Syria, Assad must still contend with pockets of fighting and the intervention of external actors—namely, Iran, Russia, and Turkey—that undermine his sovereignty, even as they compete among themselves for influence. In Yemen, external interference from Iran and Saudi Arabia fuels the fighting and exacerbates an unwillingness of the warring parties to compromise. And in Libya, an armed conflict over territory and power continues among a slew of domestic actors (including two governments, dozens of militias, and vestiges of the Islamic State) and has invited growing interference from external actors such as the UAE, Turkey, and Egypt, with no sign of a resolution on the horizon. These violent struggles prevent, or at least impede, a consolidation of strong, centralized rule that could offer such countries the possibility of restored sovereignty, governing institutions, and functioning economies.

Even in countries that weathered the 2011 waves of protests without deteriorating into civil conflict (e.g., Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran), the resumption of mass demonstrations across the region in 2019 once again raised questions as to the resilience and cohesion of these regimes. Given the unaddressed grievances and the intensity of these ongoing struggles, the region might well undergo additional shockwaves in the coming years that could bring about additional, unexpected changes.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the salient contrast between our argument and the two alternatives presented here concerns the question of stability. The dividing line is between those who would contend that a relatively stable order (old or new) has taken hold in the Middle East, and those who believe the region remains unstable and, therefore, will continue to produce waves of unrest. This debate reflects conflicting assessments of the regimes' abilities to manage what few would argue are endemic economic problems and ongoing identity-related crises that have gone largely unresolved. Adherents of the stable-order approaches implicitly assess that regimes have developed sufficient tools to contend with the current state of affairs, whereas the struggle we have outlined in this article suggests that the very existence of such regimes—particularly if they fail to adequately resolve core economic and social problems—could condemn the region to future bouts of unrest, similar to those witnessed in recent years.

On the face of it, the three alternatives invite very different conclusions about the future of the region. Yet the complexities of the regional system today are such that elements of all three can exist side by side, and the struggle we have outlined here partly reflects an ongoing battle between supporters of the old order, advocates of a new order, and those seeking to undermine any order. In the decade to come, properly assessing the Middle East regional system will require an analytical framework that incorporates elements of all three approaches and draws on expertise on transitional periods (i.e., periods characterized primarily by

instability, uncertainty, and volatility), a deep familiarity with the history and traditions of the region, and an evolving understanding of the region's characteristics as they have emerged in recent years.

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