L-r: Presidents Rouhani (Iran), Erdogan (Turkey), and Putin (Russia) at a press conference in Ankara, April 4, 2018. Photo: kremlin.ru

Political Trends in the Middle East: A Glimpse into the Future?

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The primary trends that have emerged in the Middle East in the last decade fall into two interrelated and complementary groups. The first reflects the impact of global trends and the second can be traced to regional currents. The ten years since the Arab Spring have changed the Middle East. The new reality manifests itself in an increased demand for social and economic reforms, which in turn contributes to a high level of internal instability, i.e., to new waves of social unrest. Concern about the US intention to cut back its military commitments has led Arab countries to rely on strategic diversification. They maintain their traditional orientation toward the United States, but at the same time establish ties with Russia and China. To some degree the Arab-Israeli normalization is caused by a search for a new security provider. The Arab Spring has contributed to the rise of regional hegemons—Turkey, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia—that have become more assertive in implementing their strategic goals. In fact the local powers, vigorously advancing their agendas, have more often than not overplayed their global partners.

Keywords: trends, conflicts, normalization, regional hegemons, non-state actors, global powers, new bipolarity

Global Trends and their Projection onto the Region

The impact of global trends on the region can be seen on three principal levels. First, the newly emerged global bipolarity, in the form of the rivalry between the United States and China, has not had a decisive impact on the Middle East. The United States, despite its intentions to reduce its presence and commitments across the region, still possesses the most powerful and influential military, remains a dominant political and economic player, and continues to embody the cultural aspects of globalization.

To be sure, China is now an influential actor in the region, with impressive economic and technological capabilities. Beijing has expanded its influence in the Middle East mostly through the oil and gas sector and infrastructure projects, in particular those undertaken in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-related countries. An example of how Beijing has stepped up its activities is the agreement China National Offshore Oil Corporation signed with ADNOC, the state oil company of Abu Dhabi, on July 22, 2019. The sides agreed to "search for and develop new opportunities for cooperation" in the oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) sectors (Manukov, 2020). Strategically, China considers the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to be critical, and therefore established its first foreign military base in Djibouti. Beijing also invests heavily in commercial ports, including Pakistan's Gwadar and Oman's Dukm port, both strategically located on opposite sides of the Gulf of Oman. There is some concern in the region (especially on the part of Israel, Turkey, and a number of Arab states) about the prospects of China's partnership with Iran. Countries in the region are focused on making sure that Iran and China do not form a partnership of sorts, which they fear might get out of control.

That said, the extent to which China has entered the Middle East and become a leading external player should not be exaggerated. While Middle East partners of the US are already recipients of Chinese technologies and investments, as Ori Sela and Brandon Friedman have noted, "If there is an area where rising Sino-American tension may force difficult choices in these countries, it is China's continued effort to introduce new global digital and communications infrastructure and standards" (Sela & Friedman, 2020). It goes without saying that digital and communications standards are useful tools of influence for Beijing, but they fall short in terms of providing China with a dominant position in the region. Finally, the cultural gap between China and regional powers prevents more active exchanges. In 2018, for example, students from Arab countries did not appear on the top list of international students studying in China by country of origin (Statistical Report, 2019).

On a second level, tensions between Russia and the West (a residue of the Cold War era) remain, but they are no longer capable of shaping the system of relations in the region. The Middle East has not become a place in which relations among global powers can be construed as positive. Nonetheless, there are still areas in which the global powers cooperate, such as Russian-American deconflicting policies in Syria, the Geneva process, negotiations on Libya under the auspices of the UN, and the fight against terrorism. At the same time, even a modest level of Russian collaboration with the Western countries would not be possible were Russia not strengthening its military-strategic and political positions in the region. Moscow's Middle East course is thus the result of its confident stance on the world stage, which allowed it to take far-reaching decisions.

Moscow has become an important player and has demonstrated its ability to be a game changer. The growth of its military-technical and economic ties with Middle East states is evident. Russia has acquired strategically important military bases on the Mediterranean coast. Since it possesses mostly hard power, its success in the region can be partly attributed to the willingness of some local states to see

Russia's presence as a counterweight to US dominance. According to some estimates, a quasi-Cold War situation has provided these states with better maneuvering options.

On a third level, a high degree of uncertainty, a noticeable trait of contemporary international relations, is now clearly manifested in the Middle East. Moreover, local conflicts and clashes now have the ability to contribute to global unpredictability. In a forecast prepared by the Institute of World Economy and International Relations under the Russian Academy of Sciences, uncertainty was labeled as "negative" certainty. "Uncertainty, as one of the characteristics of international relations in recent years, is giving way to negative certainty in the medium-term horizon of 2024-2025" (*Russia and the World 2020*, 2019). To be sure, uncertainty in international relations is far from a new phenomenon. Throughout history one can observe events that could not have been predicted, but were later perceived as entirely logical. For the Middle East, uncertainty has long been the norm and a sign of a rapidly changing picture of relations among the main players.

Regional Trends

Regional dynamics sometimes mirror global trends, albeit with variations. At other times they even surpass them and serve as signals of future international shifts and changes. Thus, the large-scale social movements and demonstrations that erupted in the Middle East beginning in late 2010 and were eventually labeled the Arab Spring, soon become a signal of global distress. Subsequently, Spain, France, Venezuela, the United States, and Belarus were no less affected by such protest movements, which, despite the inherent differences in culture and circumstances, are inspired by a common longing for justice and dignity.

The dominance of domestic agendas, whereby any actions in the international arena are carried out with an eye to placating domestic audiences, has frequently been a recognizable attribute of state policy in Middle East countries.

Taking an active role in foreign endeavors is designed to compensate for failures in domestic affairs and to ensure the mobilization of the masses around certain elite groups. Appealing to a country's historical background, with the hope to reclaim former greatness and influence, also plays a significant role.

Such actions are easy to discern, for example, in the politics of Turkey and Iran. In Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, a long-serving political leader, is adept at using Israel's foreign policy agenda to ensure that he maintains his position of power and that his electorate continues to support him, regardless of the country's economic and social difficulties. Recently, however, such inward-looking foreign policy has been increasingly observed in the world's leading powers. Thus, President Trump utilized his foreign policy achievements to boost his ratings with a domestic audience as proof of his effectiveness. In Russia, foreign policy news stories dominated the media when compared to the domestic agenda, at least before the pandemic struck.

On a related note, that regional forces have become more active and that competition between them has increased as a result confirms the thesis that the process of transition occurring in the system of international relations provides medium and small countries more opportunities for maneuver. The temporary absence of an external organizing force (or forces) allows regional players to behave more assertively. It is also possible that the very retrenchment of Great Powers produces new situations and dynamics that foment a sense of insecurity that prompts regional powers to act. This may be true not only of states, but also of various types of non-state armed groups, which are rapidly learning and becoming more professional due to their participation in regional conflicts.

At present, the primary regional actors are Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, which have all taken advantage of the slowing development of some Arab states resulting from conflicts or the aggravation of social and economic

problems. These aspiring hegemons are skillfully using their resources and influence as well as economic, political, and military capabilities.

Iran, currently under sanctions, still manages to maintain some economic stability in its attempts to create a "resistance economy," which, nevertheless, now faces even bigger challenges brought on by the drop in world oil prices and the impact of the coronavirus. Turkey is not afraid to demonstrate its readiness to use military force in different situations and war theaters in a more assertive manner. Saudi Arabia does not shy away from emphasizing its special role, not only in the Middle East, but also beyond its borders. Israel is a powerful player that prefers to leverage its military might and achievements in science and technology as the main drivers of progress.

Russia has managed to establish good relations with the local powers, but these relationships often lack predictability. The regional powers, have interests of their own that they pursue with no regard to the global partner. Thus Russia-Turkey relations are an uneasy and fragile alliance that has already experienced a number of crises. Ankara's relations with its NATO allies have also become more conflictual. The Russian-Iranian "marriage of convenience" may enable the two countries to iron out bumps, but it can hardly make Iran more responsive to Russia's interests. Despite good relations with Moscow, Israel continues its raids on Iran's facilities, demonstrating Russia's inability to close Syria's airspace. August 2018 saw a serious crisis between the two states when the Syrian forces downed a Russian IL 20 by mistake amid an Israeli raid.

The local players are becoming more independent in their political behavior. This only adds assertiveness to their familiar political style. Small and even some medium powers are known for reacting much more quickly to events, though not always in balanced fashion. They are often ready to raise the stakes, thereby leaving their opponents with no chance to save face. Likewise, they might quickly elect to launch an armed conflict or sever diplomatic relations. In the Middle East, rapidly transitioning to violent conflict or escalating political tensions, all in the absence of an existential threat, has traditionally been a trademark of local behavior and a distinctive feature of inter-regional relations.

Conflict as a Systemic Factor

The regional system has always been conflict-prone. Almost all nations in the region are involved in open or latent conflicts. They do not participate in organizations that provide transparency or control over them, and as a rule they have vague ideas about each other's intentions, especially since the nations themselves are not always able to assess rationally their own aspirations.

Since 2010, conflicts, regardless of their nature and area, have begun to multiply and become increasingly systemic, quickly becoming the framework for regional relations. Even an internal conflict can be immediately internationalized, and regional state and non-state actors alike are drawn into its orbit, offering support to their clients while striving to increase their own influence. Evidence of these trends can easily be seen in the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Libya.

There are numerous examples of escalation. The rapidly escalating confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has included attacks on key infrastructure and industrial facilities. Israel is actively using military force in promoting its interests in the region. Fears that the Syrian conflict would provide Iran with a foothold in close proximity to Israel's borders and would therefore result in a substantial increase in Tehran's assistance to Hezbollah led to frequent Israeli airstrikes on Iranian facilities in Syria, and partly on Syrian military targets. Iraq's government blamed Israel for targeting Iran-allied Popular Mobilization Forces positions in Iraq, along with Shiite militia bases near Baghdad. Turkey, in turn, has conducted an active military strategy in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus.

Just as evident is the fragmentation of participants in conflicts, particularly when field commanders and various armed fighters take matters into their own hands, at which point there is a clear onset of the so-called de-sovereignization of states, whereby they gradually lose their monopoly on the legitimate use of military force. During conflicts, a change in functional roles can occur—independent and illegal military groups may become part of the armed forces, and then once again break away from official structures. They are trained with the help of external sponsors and turn into semi-professional armies.

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Contemporary Middle East conflicts are overwhelmingly asymmetric. Even before the Arab Spring it was obvious that the era of classical wars involving regular armies is over. The present day conflicts occur on the territory of one or more adjacent states, and their asymmetry and hybrid nature are manifested in the types of actors involved, i.e., non-state actors as militias vs. state actors. More non-state armed militant groups have emerged in the last eight years than in the previous eight decades, setting a trend that will define conflict in the coming decade, i.e., the further proliferation of armed militant groups. These groups are built around highly adaptive alliances of smaller-scale units with diffuse leadership and authority. They act more like a disruptive start-up than a standard everyday corporation (*Armed Conflict Survey 2020*, 2020).

The conflicts also may involve varying degrees of external interference from regional and/or global powers. The entry of new national elites into the political fold, their struggle for territory and resources, their yearning for self-determination that can only be achieved through independent statehood—all these elements of confrontation guarantee that these regions will become increasingly fragmented, notwithstanding globalization. Conflicts most often arise on the ruins of empires, in multi-ethnic states, and/or in cases when central governments grow weak and begin losing strict control over their national areas. Ethnic and religious mobilization, in turn, contributes to the further weakening of state foundations. As a conflict progresses, violence starts being perceived as acceptable in society and raises the level of a state's overall aggression.

It is in these types of conflicts that politicized identities become both a driver of the conflict (the contrast between "us and them") and an important tool in the hands of opponents. Numerous proxy wars or elements thereof (Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya) serve as examples of strategic and tactical alliances that are based on common elements of identity (confessional, ethnic, tribal).

In tandem, interstate conflicts (Iran-Saudi Arabia, Iran-Israel, Saudi Arabia-Qatar), carried out directly or through proxies, proceed without interruption. They also have identifiable traits that contribute to mutually distorted perceptions of the opponent's intentions and plans. For example, the Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict, which in principle could be settled politically, has become seemingly insurmountable due to how the conflict is interpreted by the parties. In 2020, Saudi Arabia, unlike other Gulf states, refused to provide Iran with humanitarian aid related to the pandemic, this despite the fact that in 2019 it participated in indirect contacts with Iran. This uncompromising attitude stems from the perception of the conflict as a zero-sum game. According to James M. Dorsey, "resolving the tug of war in the Middle East will require a backing away from approaches that treat conflicts as zero-sum games, and engagement by all regional and external players. To achieve that, players would have to recognize that in many ways, perceptions on both sides of the

Gulf divide are mirror images of one another: all parties see each other as existential threats" (Dorsey, 2020).

Confessional and religious identities, despite their functional similarity with other factors of collective identity, still retain their own special features. "Religion can define reality…It links cognitive definitions of ultimate reality with structures backed by emotion and obligation. In so doing, it can authorize, legitimate, enable, and even require violent action in the face of urgent threats, profanations of sacred symbols and extreme otherhood" (Brubaker, 2015). While religious and confessional factors can turn conflicts into conflicts of values, their use has been instrumental and pragmatic, reflecting the tasks facing elites, such as the need to find allies and make the confrontation civilizational and valuable. This confessional dimension, which colors the conflict in its own way, is by no means its cause and, in some situations, does not prevent the normalization and rapprochement of former opponents dictated by pragmatic considerations. The contradictions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are not caused by doctrinal differences, and the processes of radicalization cannot be considered solely a product of religious belief or their respective ethnic cultures. Ana Belen Soage offers a fair assessment of the conflict, writing:

> Once invoked, sectarianism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the dehumanisation of the other exacerbates the scale and viciousness of the hostilities. Nevertheless, a full understanding of the situation requires revisiting the historical and geopolitical context that has led to an increase in sectarian strife over the last decade or so. Such an exercise reveals that sectarian narratives often conceal more prosaic motivations, and that the current cold war in the Middle East has more to do with ideological competition, regime survival and the

regional balance of power than with the Saqifa gathering or the Battle of Karbala. (Soage, 2017)

Tehran's rhetoric of opposing Israel and the United States resonates with the mood of Arab and Muslims on the street and undermines the image of Riyadh, which has edged toward the gradual normalization of relations with Israel and is an ally of the US.

During the Arab Spring, Tehran presented its Islamic Revolution not as a Shiite event, but as a model for the entire Muslim world. Thus, pragmatic motives prompted Iran not to focus on the Shiite nature of its revolution. Rather, it quickly became clear that sectarianism was hindering the export of the Iranian revolution in the context of growing social protests in the Arab states. At the same time, in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia or in its activities in Syria and Iraq, the confessional (Shiite) factor played a crucial role among its allies (Hezbollah, Shiite militias). For Saudi Arabia, Sunna, when seen through the lens of the Wahhabi, reinforces its claims of being leader of the entire Muslim world and also creates additional opportunities to contain Iran, which has been trying to project its influence onto Shiite communities in some Arab countries. Thus Saudi Arabia feels threatened by the ideology promoted by Iran, which attracts many Muslims. In particular, Tehran's rhetoric of opposing Israel and the United States resonates with the mood of Arab and Muslims on the street and undermines the image of Riyadh, which has edged toward the gradual normalization of relations with Israel and is an ally of the US.

Instrumentalism in the use of confessional identity, widely practiced by Middle East actors, has its manifestations in the Iran-Syria alliance. While it is commonly believed that the two are united by a common Shiite identity, their ties in fact are based not so much on confessional factors but rather on pragmatic considerations. The Shia basis of their alliance appears

shaky—it was only in 1973 that the Lebanese Imam Musa Sadr, at the request of President Hafez al-Assad, recognized the Nuseirites as members of the Shiite community. By securing a recognized affiliation with the Shiites, i.e., a clearly defined sectarian identity, Assad was able to solve a number of practical political tasks: the integration of his country into the wider Muslim community, the legitimization of his power among the ruling elite inside Syria, and the expansion of the field of potential allies. Rapprochement with Iran provided additional advantages for both the Syrian regime and the internationally isolated Iranian ayatollahs. The Alawite-Shia affiliation provides the government of Bashar al-Assad with the support of Iran's Shiite proxies. The Syrian leader is also able to take advantage of Hezbollah's resistance doctrine, which has traditionally been used as a tool for political mobilization of Lebanese Shiites.

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Political institutions in Iraq that were formed on a confessional (Shiite) basis after the US invasion proved to be ill-prepared and unable to ensure security and stable development. The response was the rise of the Islamic State (initially ISIS—Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), a terrorist organization that incorporated politically marginalized Sunnis, primarily former military personnel of Iraq, and Baath activists.

The conflict in Yemen also has features of an identity clash, but in this country the conflict is more multi-level and complex, including not only sectarian but also tribal and territorial dimensions. Internal and external forces use these identities very pragmatically. As a result,

this conflict is sometimes perceived as a proxy war with a sectarian accent, reflecting the Iran–Saudi Arabia confrontation.

Identity politics that are widely used by the parties in the Middle East can be overshadowed by common social goals. For instance, the Shiites and the Sunnis came out together against Iranian dominance in protests in Iraq during the autumn of 2019 (Belen'kaya, 2019). The struggle against corruption in Lebanon has played a unifying role for different sectarian and religious groups.

Normalization as a Step toward a New Regional Balance

A common enemy can become a driver for rapprochement between long-term opponents. That both Israel and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a mutual conflict with Iran and have concerns about Turkey's increasingly active regional posturing contributed to the gradual warming of relations between them. Bolstered by US support, UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco have concluded agreements with Israel. Even more importantly, such normalization of relations can be attributed to modernization trends that have also been more pronounced in the region. They signal the overcoming of old prejudices and the emergence of new military-political and technological ties among the former adversaries. These heralded peace accords have created a new balance of power in the Middle East.

Some observers even believe that Mohammed bin Zayed, colloquially known as MBZ, has a far reaching and ambitious plan for a full strategic alliance between the moderate Sunni countries and Israel, with the US contributing to the overall package with massive arms sales (Baskin, 2020). In any case, the inclusion of Israel in the security scheme of the Gulf monarchies will bring forth new challenges for them and for Israel. For the Arabs, the new peace accentuates a difficult task of preparing public opinion, given that for the public, the Palestinian issue remains

a priority and Israel a historical foe. Although clearly there has been a certain marginalization of the Palestinian issue, it remains on the agenda and demands international attention. As for Israel, its new role as a provider of security might turn out to be quite difficult to reconcile in the context of the continuing conflict and in terms of the traditional obligations of Israel's new partners to the Arab and Muslim world.

The new trend of normalization of relations has emerged under the impact of individual political decisions that have gradually culminated in a new system of regional interaction. The agreement signed by Israel and Jordan in August 2020 opens more flight paths over both countries, including new routes over Israel for Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain (Blumenthal, 2020). The agreement with Sudan, finalized following the Abraham Accords, also opens new routes for Israeli flights. The agreements are a testament to Israel's growing integration into the Middle East.

Conclusion

The trends discussed in this paper, increasingly visible in the Middle East, are signs of serious changes in the balance of forces and speak loudly of efforts to overcome longstanding psychological barriers, what Harold Saunders, an architect of Camp David, called the "other walls" (Saunders, 1991). These slow-moving currents are not necessarily irreversible, but they are new for the region and look promising. They indicate that regional policy is becoming more independent. The continuing study of regional international relations allows us to conclude that they do not always copy global trends. On the contrary, they can even precede them and set the tone. The normalization of relations in the Middle East gives us a glimpse of what long-awaited stability can look like. If tensions can abate in the Middle East, a region famous for its conflicts and turmoil, then future pragmatic and responsible actions of world players might also reduce international turbulence and tensions.

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