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REGIONAL POWERS AND THE PRODUCTION OF INSECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT

What impact have regional powers had on shaping regional order in the Middle East? What role will they play in the future of the regional system? Following the US-led invasion of Iraq and the failure of the USA to establish regional order, the area has witnessed a series of attempts by regional states to project power at the regional level and reshape the regional system around their own interests. This report surveys recent efforts by Iran, Qatar, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to influence the dynamics of this system. The report concludes that such strategies have generally failed to recognize or accommodate the security interests of rival regional states and their societies, and they have thus resulted in regional power rivalries, encouraged by external powers, that have led to a new level of destructive civil wars, weapons proliferation, state fragmentation and humanitarian crises. To stem the continuing consequences of these geopolitical rivalries, external powers and the international community need to work with regional states to manage ongoing conflicts, define norms for regional power projection and establish inclusive regional negotiations to forge the basis for a new order.

INTRODUCTION

What impact have regional powers had on shaping regional order in the Middle East? One of the main endeavours of the Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA) project is to understand the “shifting power dynamics” across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and to “identify the most salient factors that are likely to shape future regional dynamics” (Colombo and Quero 2016: 105). As a contribution to this collective effort, this report considers the rise of regional powers in order to assess their changing role in shaping the regional Middle East system.

This report argues that the insecurity generated by US policy in the 2000s and the manner of US retreat since 2008 have encouraged an acceleration of the trend towards regional power rivalry and conflict. While the USA and other external powers had previously sought to contain regional conflicts, the political conflicts and insecurity generated by the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the “new Arab wars” (Lynch 2016) that followed the Arab uprisings, combined with the limited power projection of what had long been the major Arab regional powers (Egypt, Iraq and Syria), have led to the rise of a new set of states projecting power at the regional level and attempting to reshape the regional system around their own interests. These processes mark a significant qualitative change in the regional Middle East system, now increasingly defined as a multipolar system lacking norms, institutions or balancing mechanisms to constrain conflict and the use of force.

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This report builds on the framework of the MENARA concept paper No. 5 (Makdisi et al. 2017), which highlights the long-standing pattern of external power intervention that has shaped the regional Middle East system, and extends its analysis by offering a survey of the attempts by Iran, Qatar, Turkey, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia to emerge as regional powers. Each of these states have sought, to different degrees, to project power beyond their proximate neighbours and establish norms of state behaviour in attempts to define a new regional order. While Israel had long been the only regional power with the capacity to project power, albeit within limitations, the Middle East is now defined by a number of large and small states seeking to pursue their own interests in a similar, generally destabilizing, manner. Rather than assess the relative power capabilities of these states (see Fürting 2014), this report focuses on the states' rival geopolitical visions for regional order and the results of their efforts to promote such orders.

The report concludes that the efforts of these states to directly and indirectly project coercive power at the regional level while failing to recognize and accommodate the security interests of rival regional states have led to a new level of destructive civil wars, weapons proliferation, state fragmentation and ongoing humanitarian crises. To stem the continuing consequences of these rivalries, this report highlights the need for external powers, including the USA, Europe, China and the international community, to ensure these states manage ongoing conflicts, define norms for regional power projection and establish inclusive regional negotiation mechanisms to forge the basis for a new regional order.

1. EXTERNAL POWERS AND REGIONAL ORDER

This report follows the MENARA project understanding of “order” in international politics to refer to “a formal or informal arrangement that sustains rule-governed interactions among different units within a system in their pursuit of individual and collective goals” (Malmvig et al. 2016: 40). It further follows the MENARA project’s approach of viewing the international politics of the Middle East as the politics of a regional subsystem in which states have sought to define their concept of order at the regional level (Hinnebusch 2014, Malmvig et al. 2016: 37–8, Makdisi et al. 2017). This subsystem is shaped by historical, cultural, geographic and political features (Hinnebusch 2014, Hazbun 2010: 244–5).

In large part due to repeated interventions by the USA and European powers, there has been no dominant or hegemonic regional power in the MENA region in the modern era (see Lustick 1997, Hinnebusch 2013). With the decline of Egypt’s effort to order the region – a struggle that defined geopolitics there in the late 1950s and 1960s – no regional state has been able to project power across the whole region or attempt to define regional norms by itself. Meanwhile, norms of state behaviour shifted from a contest over shared understandings of regional Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s to an emphasis on state sovereignty and *raison d’état* by the early 1970s (Barnett 1998). During the 1970s and 1980s, rival powers such as Iraq, Syria and Egypt could primarily project power against proximate states, forming what Raymond Hinnebusch (2014: 51) refers to as a regional system of “fragmented multipolarity”.

For most of the Cold War, the major global powers gave priority to global dynamics over regional ones; but with the end of the Cold War, scholars of international politics as well as policymakers became increasingly interested in the dynamics of regional subsystems. In one influential formulation, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003: 44) define regional security complexes as “set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another”. The Middle East region, from Egypt to Iran and from Turkey to Yemen, has formed such a regional security complex since at least the 1990–1 Gulf War.

With the end of the Cold War, the USA (at times aided by European states) sought to define a regional order in the Middle East through its own inventions using the tools of diplomacy, economic and military aid, as well as coercion. In the 1990s, the USA came to play a major political, economic and military role in the region in an effort to impose a pro-USA regional order (Indyk 1993, Shlaim 1995). Following the 1990–1 US-led war against Iraq, the USA maintained considerable political leverage and military capacity and sought to play a hegemonic role as the most dominant power in the region. The USA, unrivalled and with European support, helped foster multilateral and bilateral negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbours that in part led to the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization and a peace treaty between Jordan and Israel (1994). These agreements solidified Israel’s power in the region, legitimized its occupation of Palestinian territories and crushed Palestinian (and pan-Arab) popular movements (al-Hour 2015). At the same time, the USA backed efforts to promote neoliberal economic reforms across the region and the integration of regional economies into global markets. Lastly, with its massive military presence in the Gulf, the USA maintained a policy of “dual containment” that included economic sanctions, military operations, covert action and diplomatic manoeuvring in its efforts to contain these two states that opposed US designs for a pro-USA regional order based on an alignment with Israel and Turkey (El-Shazly and Hinnebusch 2002).

Between 1990 and 2005, the period of the so-called “American Era in the Middle East” (Haass 2006; see also Hinnebusch 2014: 59–67, Hazbun 2107: 32–33), most states in the MENA region as well as external powers with regional interests defined their role within terms of reference defined by the USA. Allied states competed to secure a role within the regional architecture set out by the USA (even when they sought to modify its terms), while rival states, unable to realize an alternative regional order, defined their goals in terms of the spaces and means by which they sought to resist would-be US hegemony. The effort to build a *Pax Americana*, however, was eclipsed by 2000 with the failure of the Israeli–Palestinian and Israeli–Syrian peace processes, and with popular Arab opposition to the normalization of ties to Israel and neoliberal economic policies that seemed only to benefit a narrow elite while plunging the vast majority into poverty, food insecurity and unemployment (Hanieh 2013, Hazbun 2015).

Following the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, the USA launched a global “war on terror” and a militarized project for regional transformation that included the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq; so-called “democracy promotion” policies; and the strong backing of Israel in its 2006 war against the Hezbollah that, with Iranian support, had led a popular resistance movement to liberate southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation. By the late 2000s, in large part due to these policies, the greater Middle East was in a new phase of turmoil and popular insecurity (Ehteshami

2009). With the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, the USA initially attempted to define a new regional role for itself with the expectation of the rise of a new set of more representative political regimes in the Middle East (Hazbun 2013), but the USA soon shifted its approach and began to disengage from the region, with a preference for order over change. The post-2013 US approach was defined by a policy that narrowly addressed US security concerns with nuclear proliferation and what it defines as “terrorism”. Rather than helping to establish a regional order with a diminished US role and more balance between rival powers, the US only encouraged regional conflict by offering massive arms deals and military support to its allies, deploying coercive sanctions and failing to engage in the formation of robust mechanisms to address regional conflicts such as that between the Gulf states, Israel and the Palestinians, and the rival parties involved in the Syrian, Yemeni and Libyan civil wars. These trends were extended by the inauguration of the Trump administration. US unilateralism and failure to adhere to and promote global norms led to an international system in the early 21st century lacking consensus about the future of global order and norms of international behaviour.

2. TOWARDS A NEW GEOPOLITICS OF REGIONAL POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

As the USA retreated from seeking to impose order on the region, a new geopolitics of regional power conflict in the Middle East arose in the second decade of the 21st century. These dynamics were enabled by the heightened insecurity felt by regional states following the US occupation of Iraq. Later, the US retreat from the region, combined with the constraints that recent civil wars and uprisings placed on the ability of one-time influential states such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria to project regional power, led to new strategies on the part of many regional states. As a consequence, in the last decade, Egypt, Iraq and Syria have been subject to external influence and interventions by states and non-state actors, while other states – including Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine and Bahrain – have weakened and become unable to limit such external interventions (Salloukh 2017). The result has been a regional system that has opened more space for geopolitical competition by regional powers and also states from outside the region. These processes have defined new geopolitical dynamics, with rival powers attempting to redefine the norms of regional order.

The rest of this report maps out these dynamics through a survey of the policies and visions of the major regional states. It first explains how a defining feature of the new regional dynamics has been – largely as a consequence of the 2003 US-led toppling of the regime in Iraq – Iran’s expansion of its regional leverage by promoting an alliance of state and non-state actors across Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Iran’s expanded influence has generated insecurity on the part of its rivals, in particular the Arab Gulf States. These states, however, have failed to effectively balance or create a counter-weight to Iran due to their own rival interests. At the same time, they have refused to accommodate Iran through a “grand bargain” that might stabilize the regional order.

The political turmoil resulting from the Arab uprisings beginning in late 2010, and the confused US reaction to them, opened another opportunity for the expansion of influence by regional powers (see also Kamrava 2018). Accordingly, this report traces the efforts of Turkey and Qatar to suggest possibilities for regional order defined by states led by popularly elected governments. For instance, the large, militarily capable state of Turkey developed extensive economic ties to the region and sought to play a larger diplomatic role in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the small,

wealthy state of Qatar has used diplomatic inventions and pan-Arab media to project influence at a regional level. These generally compatible efforts to forge a regional order, drawing together newly elected governments and emerging political forces, collapsed in the face of a Saudi-led counter-revolution that sought to shore up authoritarian governments and resulted in an expansion of domestic divisions along sectarian lines and fostered civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya. Most recently, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have attempted to organize the region through aggressive diplomatic and military interventions as well as financial support. These states have expanded their influence in Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere while developing closer strategic cooperation with Israel and the USA under the Trump administration.

3. IRAN'S REGIONAL STRATEGY: GAINING LEVERAGE IN REGIONAL ARAB POLITICS

The emergence of a regional power is not simply a matter of expanding power projection; rather, states that seek to redefine a regional order must win other states' approval of their regional role and the norms for state behaviour that they promote. In the wake of the decline of Egypt's (contested) regional leadership in the late 1960s, Iran attempted to emerge as such a leader under the Shah. As Trita Parsi (2006) explains, in the early 1970s Iran's quest to gain ascendancy as the main regional power was based on using its oil wealth and US ties to build its military capabilities. But its effort was also linked to a nuanced effort to downplay its ties to Israel and enact policy shifts that would appeal to Arab states and their societies, including through offering support to Egypt's new "moderate" leader Anwar Sadat and settling its own ongoing territorial dispute with Iraq, which enhanced Iraqi security and state consolidation. Iran's enacting of what Parsi (2006) refers to its "Arab option" was ultimately unsuccessful, but represents an effort to define a new set of norms for a regional Middle East political order inclusive of Iran.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has been viewed in much of US and European strategic studies literature and foreign policy discourse as a revisionist power seeking to destabilize the region. However, a closer examination of its regional role since the late 1980s suggests an effort to establish a new set of regional norms that recognize the country as a major power within the Middle East system. Iran's primary goal has been to address its "acute national security concerns" (Nasr 2018: 110), exemplified by Iraq's invasion in 1980 and the growing US military presence in the Gulf region – culminating in the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. Iran rejected US efforts to reorder the region in the 1990s and 2000s and has since sought to challenge the legitimacy of a US regional presence. To do so, Iran developed a "forward defense" (Nasr 2018: 111, ICG 2018) that includes building and backing armed non-state actors in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as developing its own military capabilities such as long-range missiles. These policies, condemned as destabilizing by its regional rivals, can also be viewed as reactions to US-led efforts to define a US-dominated regional order that fails to accept any legitimate regional role for Iran and often suggests a goal of regime change in Iran. Iran "opposes a regional order designed to exclude it" (Nasr 2018: 109) and has used all its available tools to resist and obstruct such efforts. At the same time, Iran seeks to promote a regional order that accommodates Iran's regional interests (Nasr 2018: 118), but it lacks the capacities to establish such an order and its actions tend to fragment the region by promulgating insecurity for its rivals.

While Iran gained influence in Lebanon during the 1980s by helping to build the militant organization Hezbollah and then in 1990s with its closer ties to Syria, as a consequence of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 Iran has been able to greatly expand its regional leverage by promoting an alliance of state and non-state actors across Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. The regional influence of the so-called “axis of resistance” (ICG 2018) was exhibited by the military capacities of Lebanon’s militant group during the 2006 war against Israel that consolidated its regional popularity, to the detriment of the USA, Israel and Saudi Arabia (Valbjørn and Bank 2007). Iran later secured a powerful regional position by successfully backing its ally, President Bashar al-Assad, in Syria, with the help of Hezbollah and Russia, in the face of armed opposition backed by the Gulf states, Turkey and, to a limited extent, the USA.

Under President Barak Obama, the USA helped to negotiate the P5+1 deal concerning Iran’s nuclear programme, avoided direct military involvement in Syria and fought in parallel with Iran in the battle against the Islamic State. The USA, however, failed to extend these initiatives into discussions about regional strategic issues, while its continuing support for Saudi, Emirati and Israeli military policies has only encouraged Iran to expand its regional position with more significant support to Syria, Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Houthi rebels in Yemen. The result has been that Iran’s allies have been engaged in more extensive forms of military conflict as regional instability and the likelihood of escalating conflict has increased. At the same time, due to its considerable influence within several areas of conflict across the region, more than any other state in the region, Iran has explicitly sought to suggest norms for regional order based on state sovereignty and the establishment of a regional dialogue forum (Zarif 2018). In other words, Iran has become a would-be status quo regional power, seeking the legitimization and institutionalization of its relative power in regional politics while seeking to delegitimize the role of external powers (and Israel). These efforts, though, have been obstructed by the USA under President Donald Trump, which has returned to closer strategic alignment with Iran’s rival Saudi Arabia, withdrawn from the nuclear deal in 2018 and seeks to put economic pressure on Iran, together with ongoing political and economic challenges at the domestic level. The confrontational approach of the USA, aligned with the Saudi-led counter-revolution (noted below), risks escalating regional conflicts.

4. TURKEY’S SHIFTING REGIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Turkey played a limited role in the regional Middle East system until the early 2000s, when its foreign policy began to place a greater focus on the Muslim and Arab world while still seeking to improve relations with the European Union (Altunışık et al. 2011). This approach allowed Turkey to “better engage” with the Arab states of the Middle East and begin “a process driven not only by mutual economic interests but also by common identity based on cultural affinity” (Önis 2014: 207). A key early component was the improving of relations with Arab states, including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq through policy tools such as mediation, visa liberalization and free trade, leading to stronger economic ties and increased cross-border flows (ICG 2010). Most ambitiously, under Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership Turkey promoted a strategic vision in which, with its rising economic and political power and historical connections to the Muslim world, the country could play a role in helping to define an order for the region. In that

respect, Turkey articulated a set of norms for the organization of the post-Cold War Middle East regional system. The “zero problems” formulation, based on what was termed Turkey’s “strategic depth”, envisioned how Turkey could play a central role in organizing Middle East regional order due to its economic strength, democratic credentials, political ties to major external powers, and cultural and historical ties to the Arab region (Murinson 2006, Davutoglu 2010). Turkey sought to play a key role as a model state, a partner with extensive economic and diplomatic ties to the region, as well as an “order instituting actor” (Özel and Özkan 2015, Kamrava 2018: 22). As US leverage and interests in the region shifted in the mid-2000s following the challenges it faced in Iraq and elsewhere, Turkey looked to play a larger role as mediator in regional politics. In 2008, Turkey hosted proximity talks between Syria and Israel and in 2009 it tried to use its relations with Iran to help defuse US–Iran tensions over the latter’s nuclear programme (ICG 2010).

Even as many Arab states and (even more so) their societies welcomed Turkey’s distancing itself from the Israeli strategic axis and some states benefited from Turkey’s economic ties and diplomatic efforts, Turkey’s regional position was eventually challenged by the shifting dynamics of the Arab uprisings. Turkey was able, in the early stages, to attempt mediation in Bahrain, Libya and Iraq. Its efforts in Syria and Yemen (as well as Libya) were overtaken by shifts towards militarized civil war supported by external states (Akpınar 2015: 256). In the aftermath of the toppling of authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt and the election of the Muslim Brotherhood government, Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan embraced these developments. As Turkey offered itself as an ally to the new regimes in the region, many in the region and the West considered Turkey, in some ways, as a possible model for post-revolution Arab states (Kirkpatrick 2011, Seibert 2012). Overall, the rise of more popularly elected governments across the region suggested the possibility of a new basis for regional order in the Middle East.

By late 2011, Syria–Turkey tensions had increased to such an extent that Turkey openly expressed its support for the opposition forces in Syria (Arsu 2011) and welcomed Syrian refugees. In 2013, the coup that overthrew Egypt’s democratically elected president Mohamad Morsi, who had gained support from Turkey, resulted in increased tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who backed the coup and the military-dominated government that took over and suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters in Egypt.

To that end, the evolution of the Arab uprisings “into a traumatic experience for regional and global order overturned Turkish designs for a leading role in the MENA region” (Yorulmazlar and Turhan 2015: 345). As a result, Turkey had to readjust its position in line with developments. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose armed wing the People’s Protection Units (YPG) had gained US backing in its battles with ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), began to claim more territorial autonomy in northern Syria. Turkey soon came to view them as one of its most pressing threats. Like other states in the region, lacking support or leadership from the USA, Turkey began to focus more on its own immediate interests and security concerns as it faced challenges from refugee flows and terrorist bombings as well as spill-overs from the Syrian civil war including cross-border shelling and Turkey’s downing of a Russian jet flying at the edge of its airspace.

These challenges led Turkey, like other states, to develop a complex set of shifting tactical alliances with both state and non-state actors in the region. Turkey also increasingly sought to deploy military force across the Syrian and Iraqi borders when needed, to protect allies and contain threats. Turkey has often acted unilaterally to address its most pressing threats, but at the regional level it “has criticized the Gulf indirectly and Iran directly to stress the need for regional powers to establish a new order and cooperate more closely” (Ulutaş and Duran 2018: 83). Meanwhile, Turkey sees itself as playing a balancing role between the rival actors Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Israel (Ulutaş and Duran 2018). These rival parties, however, have yet to embrace such a role for Turkey. Rather, they often view Turkey’s intentions as an obstacle to their own efforts to achieve their goals, which include the establishment a regional order centred on their own interests rather than based on any form of regional accommodation.

5. THE ARAB UPRISINGS AND QATAR’S MOMENT OF REGIONAL LEVERAGE

As regional politics in the Middle East in the 2000s became polarized around the US intervention in Iraq and Iranian–Saudi rivalry, termed the “New Arab Cold War” (see Gause 2014), the small, but hydrocarbon-rich state of Qatar established an independent regional role by maintaining relations with rival sides and opening up the pan-Arab media sphere with its broadcasting outlet Al Jazeera. Meanwhile, Qatar enjoyed a degree of security by hosting a US airbase and the US military’s regional operations centre. This unique position enabled Qatar to play an outsized role at the regional level, as in 2008 when it helped establish a resolution of the political conflict between rival parties in Lebanon. In 2011, Qatar shifted its approach from using its independent position to help leverage regional conflict resolution, to a more activist role, seeking to advance political change and shifts in the regional order. Beginning with the uprising in Tunisia, Qatar “played a vital role not only in shaping the emerging narratives of protest” but also in mobilizing Arab and international support for interventions on the side of oppositional forces in Libya and Syria (Ulrichsen 2014: 1).

With its ties to Muslim Brotherhood groups across the region, Qatar viewed the outbreak of the Arab uprisings and the early success of well-organized Islamist movements as an opportunity to expand its regional leverage and influence (Henderson 2017). Following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, US policy lost clear direction and US relations with Saudi Arabia became strained. Meanwhile, Qatar could be viewed as a potentially stabilizing force with its embrace of the uprisings in the Arab world (with the exception of the one in Bahrain) and support for the government of the newly elected Islamist-affiliated president Mohamad Morsi. In 2011, Qatar used its position within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Arab League to first gain Arab and then UN approval for military intervention in Libya to support opposition forces. Qatar then took a direct military role in the conflict that led to the fall of Gaddafi (Lynch 2016: 81–90). Qatar also shifted from previous good relations with the Syrian regime to actively backing armed opposition groups seeking to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad (Henderson 2017: 127). For a brief moment, Qatar’s activist role positioned itself so as to have considerable leverage in several locations across the region during a critical phase of transition. Its role could be viewed as following broader popular sentiment across the Arab world inspired by the mobilization of democratic (or at least more politically representative) forces and hope for change. At the same time, Qatar’s role helped reactivate the Arab League as a regional body and, to some degree, seemingly sought to place Arab voices at the centre of processes of decision-making within the United Nations. Qatar thus

played a critical role in the international debate about the future of the Arab region at this moment. While not capable of projecting power at a regional level, unlike Iran, Turkey or Saudi Arabia, for a brief period Qatar could be said to have been a driving force in an effort towards defining a new regional order for the Middle East.

Qatar's role, however, was not without contradictions and was quickly eclipsed. While it backed democratic protests in other parts of the region, Qatar and its news channel Al Jazeera did not actively embrace the democratic protests in Bahrain. Moreover, its activism, which seemingly breathed new life into the Arab League, quickly led to major divisions – splitting the GCC as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar competed for influence (Lynch 2016: 82). Qatar's moment began to unravel as the Libya intervention dragged on and eventually, after the fall of Gaddafi, led to greater divisions and ongoing conflict within the country. Soon Islamist leaders in Tunisia found their leadership challenged. In Egypt, a coup overthrew the Islamist government and the new military-backed regime launched a campaign of violent suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters. Qatar's regional leverage quickly diminished as the forces it backed lost power, leading to increased tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which had backed rivals to Qatar's allies. By 2013, with a change in leadership, Qatar indicated a shift away from its adventurous policies. Nevertheless, the hostility from Saudi Arabia and the UAE was undiminished (Ulrichsen 2018). In an effort to coerce Qatar to fully renounce any independence in its foreign policy, Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched an air and sea blockade of Qatar, first in 2014 then more forcefully beginning in 2017. Qatar's plucky effort to muster political leverage at the regional level and attempt to draft new rules for Arab politics failed. Its vision was trampled by the Saudi-led counter-revolution that sought to impose reactionary forms of political change and a new order for the region.

6. THE SAUDI-LED COUNTER-REVOLUTION AND NEW REGIONAL CONFLICTS

With the exception of the state collapse and civil war that followed the US invasion of Iraq, there has been no more destabilizing policy than the Saudi effort to direct a regional counter-revolution against the Arab uprisings and impose a new regional order. The development of a new Saudi approach to regional politics can be seen as a reaction to the US invasion of Iraq that led to the rise of the Shia-dominated government and the expansion of Iranian influence in the country. Riyadh remained distant from the new Iraqi regime while private Saudi funds supported jihadists and the insurgency in Iraq. More broadly, placing its own interests over those of the USA, Saudi Arabia sought to redefine its regional rivalry with Iran along sectarian lines as a means to shore up support and political allies within Sunni populations in the Arab world (Valbjørn and Bank 2007, Gause 2014). Saudi insecurity and distrust of the USA's role in the region spiked when in 2011 the USA acquiesced to the fall of Hosni Mubarak (Lynch 2016). Saudi leaders were especially threatened by the efforts that President Obama made to declare (not without contradictions) US interests as aligned with those of the democracy-seeking protestors in Tunis, Cairo and elsewhere (Hazbun 2013). Saudi and US approaches to regional politics, if not also their core interests, began to diverge (Lynch 2016). While the USA struggled to redefine its regional role, Saudi Arabia launched what can be viewed as a regional "counter-revolution". Not only did it seek to derail the democracy-oriented narrative of the Arab uprisings and reverse the gains made – for example by crushing the uprising in Bahrain, managing an elite transition in Yemen, and supporting the 2013 coup in Egypt – but Saudi Arabia also struggled to maintain its regional influence in the face of

the expanding regional power of Iran as well as the challenge from the rising regional influence of Turkey and Qatar, which often backed Saudi rivals.

On the one hand, these actions follow the trend of other rising regional powers in the Middle East, in that they represent assertive policies to advance state interests in the wake of the decline of the regional role of the USA. On the other hand, while Turkey, Qatar and even Iran can be said to have sought the institutionalization of a new regional order based on their preferred norms, recent Saudi policy under the aggressive leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and with support from the UAE resembles the approach of George W. Bush in his effort to forcibly remake the regional system in the wake of 9/11. In both cases unilateral force was used, in violation of regional and international norms, in an effort to coerce states and societies to conform to an imposed plan for the region. President Obama's policies inadvertently encouraged this trend in Saudi policy development as the USA pursued a nuclear deal with Iran in the face of Saudi and Israeli opposition, without assisting the establishment of new norms for the regional system. Saudi Arabia, with little deference to the USA but with support from the UAE, has moved to assert its own regional interests through backing Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's regime in Egypt, supporting armed opposition groups in Syria and continuing a destructive and ineffective military campaign in Yemen, launched in 2015 following the Houthi fighters' capture of Sana'a and the displacement of Saudi-backed President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.

The evolution of this aggressive regional policy owes much to earlier shifts in the UAE's approach. In particular, since that late 1990s the UAE has sought to develop its own military capabilities and become a more active player in regional geopolitics. Since 2001, the UAE has been engaged in military actions across the region (Ulrichsen 2017) and has since "emerged as one of the region's most interventionist foreign policy players" (England and Kerr 2017). This approach has been directed by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, who has also been a strong supporter of the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman and encouraged hard-line policies towards Iraq and Qatar as well as military intervention in Yemen.

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE often portray their regional strategy as a reaction to Iran's expanding regional influence and the threat it poses to Arab Gulf states, they have failed to leverage this threat perception into effective regional balancing against Iran. The rival interests of the Arab states, their failure to cooperate and the erosion of norms for regional politics explain this "under-balancing" (Gause 2017). As a result, Qatar's short-lived attempt to revive the GCC as a forum for collective security has been debilitated. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have consistently opposed any accommodation with Iran and prevented any regional discussions of something like a "grand bargain" that might stabilize the regional order.

Most recently, the election of President Donald Trump in 2016 has encouraged Saudi efforts to transform the region through interventions and by expanding its influence in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere as well as by developing closer strategic cooperation with Israel (Filkins 2018). These efforts, such as forcing the resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri (later rescinded) in 2018 and the ongoing war in Yemen, have done little to establish a new regional order and have had the effect of expanding Iranian leverage in the face of Saudi policy failures. Rather than embracing Qatar's post-2013 shift in regional policy to help rebuild GCC consensus

policymaking, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have repeatedly sought to coerce Qatar into accepting a subservient role, resulting in the total fragmentation of the GCC as a regional organization (Bianco and Stansfield 2018). Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also sought to use financial leverage and their relative power at the regional level to pressure smaller states such as the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Egypt to align themselves with the Gulf powers' regional policies, for example in respect to Syria and "resolving" the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Without the ability to address each state's acute insecurities, such efforts have met with limited success.

Where Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made progress in redefining norms (at a limited, multilateral level) has been through their increasingly public forms of cooperation and coordination with Israel. Israel has long been the only regional state able to act as a regional power and freely project power beyond its proximate states. This capability has generally been used to serve its immediate security interests and ensure its position as a dominant regional military power, rather than as a tool to shape regional order more broadly. In the early to mid-1990s, under the efforts of the USA to develop a post-Cold War regional Middle East order based on the decline of the Arab–Israeli conflict, Israel began to seek a fuller regional role beyond its ties to Turkey and Egypt; but this effort had collapsed by 2000 and Israel returned to its role as a militarily dominant state at the margins of the politics of a regional system dominated by Arab states. The Arab uprisings and the ensuing regional conflicts have shifted the focus of regional politics away from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, yet Israel seems to have taken advantage of the Saudi–Iranian cleavage to strengthen its ties with the Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, while enjoying more room to tighten its siege on Gaza and control of the West Bank. Together, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel seem to have suggested to the Trump administration a collective vision for "resolving" the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by coercing the very diminished Palestinian Authority into accepting the status quo, but even agreement amongst these parties (which is uncertain) would not make such plans viable. Regional and societal opposition to such plans exemplify the failure of these parties unified by the Saudi-led counter-revolution to develop the bases to forge a new regional order. At the same time, the growing regional influence of Iran and the military assertiveness of Hezbollah have led to more aggressive Israeli actions, including attacks on Hezbollah assets in Syria and constant drone activity over Lebanon, which risk the escalation of conflict. Meanwhile, rather than seeking negotiations with rival regional powers to address both pressing security threats and long-term strategic challenges, with Israeli and Saudi backing the USA under President Trump pulled out of the Iran deal and "demanded that Iran change just about everything regarding its behaviour in the world stage" (Harris 2018). In this way the Saudi-led counter-revolution has only intensified Saudi–Iranian rivalry while facilitating its allies' expansion of regional conflict, resulting in an increasingly unstable region at risk of further escalation of conflict.

CONCLUSION

Since the early 1990s, the USA, and to a lesser degree the European states, have often suggested that they can offer visions for regional stability and order in the Middle East. They have, however, never been able to provide the needed leadership to develop an inclusive, stable regional order. Moreover, the current uncertainty and shifting regional political dynamics have set up complex rivalries and diverging interests between regional powers that have defied such ordering and so engendered strong resistance. While Iran, Turkey and Qatar have all sought to promote new, but

differing, norms for regional politics, seeking to develop an order based around their interests, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have advanced a revisionist agenda built from a growing capacity to project power and intervene militarily across the region. The rivalry of regional powers seeking to reshape regional politics along their own designs has only contributed to regional civil wars, state erosion and ongoing humanitarian crises. The efforts by multiple regional and global powers to assert their own narrow strategic interests in the context of the post-uprisings Arab world has led to increased disarray in the region, including the fragmentation of Syria and Yemen, and massive human suffering as a consequence of the conflicts there. Another consequence is that this disarray has opened up new opportunities for external intervention in the region, as seen in the NATO campaign in Libya, Russian intervention in support of the regime in Syria and a US-led anti-ISIS military coalition force in both Syria and Iraq during 2016 and 2017.

Within this current geopolitical landscape, the region is in dire need of efforts to promote conflict management and reordering. But having once stated their backing for the reformist, proto-democratic forces of the Arab uprisings during their initial phase, the USA and European states have since generally realigned themselves with the reactionary forces of the Gulf-led counter-revolution and returned to the “war on terror” paradigm that dominated the post-9/11 period, in order to take on the ISIS regional challenge and try to reassert some form of meaningful control (Makdisi 2017). For its part, the USA under former president Barack Obama negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran but failed to offer the leadership needed to go a step further to open discussions on regional security issues, allowing President Trump to enact a reversal of the Iran deal. More generally, external powers have failed to take the needed actions to meaningfully support the resolution of violent conflicts in areas such as Palestine, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere. Worse, the USA and other external powers have often used the domestic and regional divisions as bases to attempt to expand their influence and leverage, with tools ranging from economic sanctions (such as against Iran) to direct military intervention (such as in Libya, Syria and Iraq) and military support for regional interventions (such as in Yemen and Bahrain) and substantial weapons sales throughout the region (Hindawi 2017).

With the rise of highly active, often interventionist regional powers in the Middle East, the USA and Europe can no longer expect Middle East states to acquiesce to a regional order imposed or designed from the outside. At the same time, no regional state has the capacity or recognized regional authority to define or take leadership in the establishment of such an order. The USA, EU, Russia, China and responsible regional and international organizations need to begin to focus on attempting to counter “the negative interdependence of security fears, conflict, and sectarian violence” (Salem 2016: 42) that has come to dominate regional politics in the Middle East. These external states, it should be noted, have often failed to act as role models for defining regional norms, but rather have often used the Middle East as a laboratory for geopolitical experiments and interventions, using conflicts in the region as vehicles for gaining advantage over their rivals at the global level.

A new regional order will only emerge with a broader strategy on the part of international and regional actors that seeks to develop a region-wide “security condominium” (Pollack 2003: 13). As Kenneth Pollak explains:

The process would begin by establishing a regional security forum at which relevant issues could be debated and discussed, information exchanged, and agreements framed. The members could then move on to confidence-building measures, such as notification of exercises, exchanges of observers, and information swaps. Ultimately, the intention would be to proceed to eventual arms control agreements that might include demilitarized zones, bans on destabilizing weapons systems, and balanced force reductions for all parties. (Pollack 2003: 13)

The shape of any future regional order may be one defined by spheres of influence of major regional and global powers in which weaker states and non-state actors accept the authority of the stronger, often authoritarian states. A different order, however, might be possible if societies are able to mobilize and challenge political elites who seek to suppress the popular will. Most probably, the region will remain divided by such rival dynamics and states will need to develop pluralist norms accommodating a diverse, heterogeneous region. In any case, the rise of regional powers has fundamentally shifted regional dynamics, as now several regional states seek to advance their own rival interests and visions while external powers can no longer expect regional states to allow outside actors to define the structure of the region's system.

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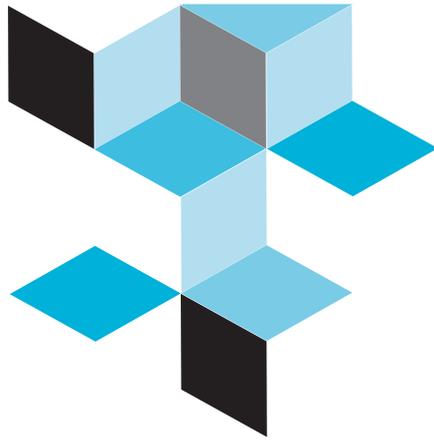
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Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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