A Regional Order Contested

Extreme instability has prompted a fundamental reconfiguration of the contemporary Middle East; as the old order crumbles, a new one has yet to emerge

By Karim Haggag

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

Much of the policy analysis and media punditry in international capitals regarding the emergence of democracy after the Arab uprisings, the collapse of the Syrian regime, and the inexorable ascent of political Islam have reflected more wishful thinking than regional realities. The unravelling of the post-First World War Sykes-Picot agreement between the United Kingdom and France was frequently invoked in cliché fashion to assume that the current state system was approaching its demise. The prevailing assumption was that the convergence of the region's civil wars, external interventions, and regional rivalries would usher in any number of scenarios foreshadowing the balkanization of the region. This too has proven to be premature as the regional state system has thus far proven to be more resilient than many had assumed.

That the prevailing regional instability has defied conventional frames of analysis is related to how the nature and scope of geopolitical power competition and power politics affect aspects of the regional order itself. The Middle East may be witnessing something that goes beyond the periodic shifts in the balance of power. Rather, the current instability is eroding the pillars that have long upheld the regional order in the Middle East, and with it the norms and rules that have governed its politics. But while the old order may be crumbling, it is not clear what will replace it. This is because the emerging new order has now become the subject of intense competition between Arab and non-Arab states alike, one that will establish the new rules that will define the region's politics.
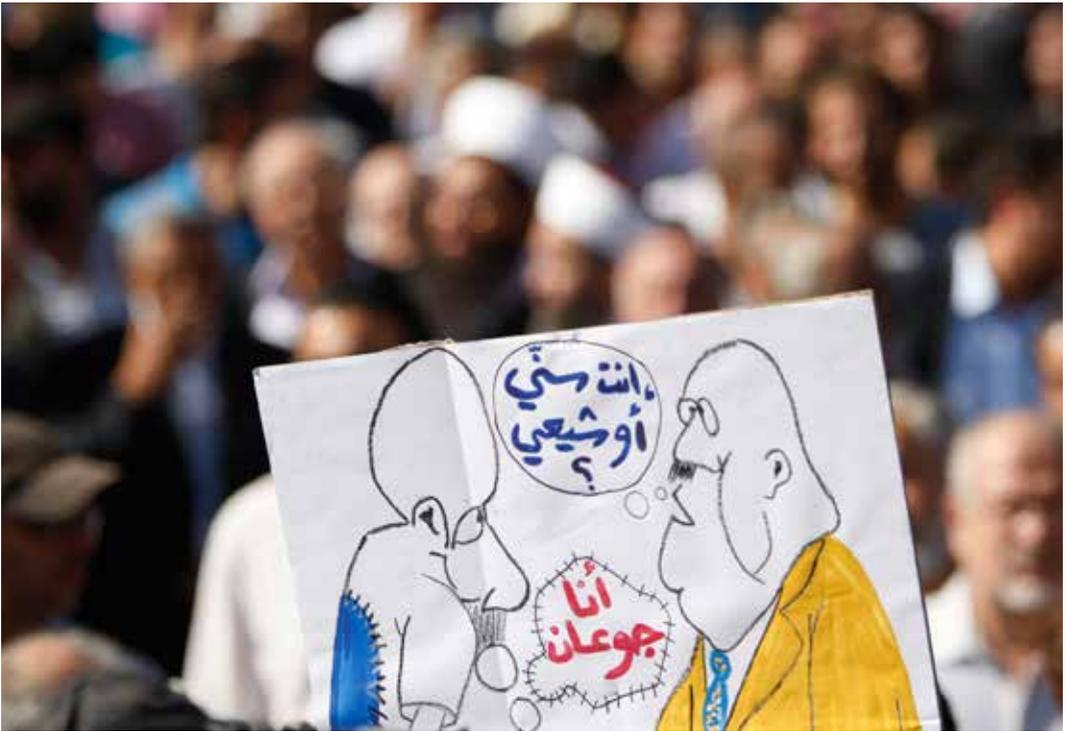
Out with the Old: Eroding Pillars of Regional Order
Regional disarray in the Middle East can be traced back to the confluence of two strategic trends that have evolved gradually over the course of the last two decades: the weakening of the Arab core and the shift in the strategic posture of the United States toward the region.

△ A banner highlighting the high cost of living in Saida, southern Lebanon, reads "Are you a Sunni or Shia? I am hungry." Nov. 5, 2010. *Ali Hashisho/Reuters*

The Arab state system, despite the divergent political and geopolitical interests of its actors, was built on a common history, language and, above all, a unified regional political identity. In a sense, the Arab framework provided for the management of regional politics, which both mitigated inter-Arab rivalries and allowed Arab states to act as a strategic bulwark against the region's non-Arab neighbors. Arab support for Iraq during its eight-year-long war with Iran; the political consensus in support of Syria's intervention in the Lebanese civil war; the political cover provided by the Arab League in 1990 that paved the way for the U.S.-led international coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation; Egypt's 1998 diplomatic intervention to defuse the crisis between Syria and Turkey; and the 2003 Arab Peace Initiative, which provided a framework for comprehensive peace with Israel, all exemplified how the Arab core functioned as a strategic pillar of regional order, albeit a shaky one.

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

> *The 2003 U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq were the first of several shocks that set the Arab core on a course toward gradual fragmentation.*

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

Over the course of the last decade, this strategy underwent a major re-evaluation as developments steadily undermined the fundamental tenets of America's Middle East policy. These include: the demise of the Palestinian–Israeli peace process, the toll of the Iraq and Afghan wars and the failure of America's state-building project in both countries, the chaos that ensued in the wake of the NATO intervention in Libya, and the inability to shape the trajectory of the Arab uprisings. All of these events contributed to a sense of policy fatigue in Washington over what President of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass would describe as the post-American Middle East. As a consequence

of this re-assessment, Washington's Middle East policy focus shifted from a strategic emphasis on maintaining order and the management of conflicts to a narrower set of interests, namely counterterrorism, halting the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and the defense of key allies—minimally defined as deterring direct acts of aggression.

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

Interventionism and Deepening Insecurity
The fragility of the Arab core produced a general condition of state weakness in a number of key Arab countries at the moment when the region's security was undergoing a process of momentous change, thus deepening the sense of overall insecurity.

The fraying of the Arab core brought in its wake the increasing sectarianization of regional politics. The political categories of radicalism versus conservatism that have traditionally characterized ideological competition over the issues of Arabism, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and pro-Western alignment, no longer applied. In their place emerged an array of alternative ethno-sectarian political identities. Even the ideologies of political Islam have come to be defined in sectarian terms of Sunni versus Shia. The resulting regional security dynamic led to a highly divergent and complex mix of threat perceptions among the major regional actors. Geopolitical competition was perceived not just in terms of conventional threats to national security, but also in terms of threats to domestic political order and regime survival. Strategic competition thus took the form of a complex realignment of diplomatic, military, political, and ideational power. This in turn would breed a type of maximalist security doctrine that would perceive threats in near-existential terms.

The deepening regional insecurity fostered by this environment was greatly

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

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

Intervention by regional powers in the Middle East's civil wars or the invasion of weaker states was relatively infrequent, averaging once every decade.

The Challenge of the Non-Arab Middle East

As the pillars of the old regional system were undermined, the Middle East entered into a new phase in which the political and ideological norms, as well as the balance of power of the emerging order, were challenged by the regional powers that make up the non-Arab Middle East. Israel, Iran, and Turkey have each put forward their own project for an alternative vision of regional order, founded on a set of power relationships, rules, and frameworks for regional identity fundamentally different than those which prevailed in the old regional order.

Although these projects are not wholly new, they have acquired greater momentum in the current conflict environment and the inability of the Arab

core to address the post-Arab uprising crises. The failure to devise Arab solutions to the region's burgeoning crises increasingly ceded the diplomatic, military, and political initiative outside the Arab core to the non-Arab periphery, with the Arab role reduced to ad-hoc involvement of individual states in particular conflicts.

Iran's Sectarian Reach

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

> *Iran's role as a leading regional power draws on the historic legacy of Persia's imperial tradition, its revolutionary Islamic credentials, and the mobilizing power of a liberation-based political discourse on behalf of oppressed people.*

Complementing this ideological posture, a host of factors related to geopolitical vulnerability, regime insecurity, and Shia sectarian affinity combined to form Iran's strategic outlook and shape its regional policy. This gave rise to a policy of Middle Eastern interventionism as a means of the Islamic Republic's forward defense. Over the years, Iran would deploy a sophisticated array of assets to operationalize this policy: a network of ties to Shia communities and seminaries throughout the Arab World, particularly in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and certain parts of the Gulf; a host of Iranian-supported Shia armed proxies that it would cultivate to provide an unconventional warfare capability—of which Lebanon's Hezbollah was the most renowned; and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its external operations arm, the Quds Force, which provides a capability for military intervention without relying directly on the regular Iranian armed forces.

Iran's regional strategy often found political expression in the "axis of resistance," a power bloc that grouped together anti-American and anti-Israeli forces, including Syria, Hezbollah, and Palestinian groups opposed to the peace process with Israel, primarily Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. For Iran, the axis of resistance was meant to support three strategic objectives: entrench Iran's presence throughout an expanding regional sphere of influence, especially after the overthrow of the Baathist regime in Iraq; increase its ability to exact a cost on America's allies in the region, primarily Israel and the Gulf states, as

a means of deterrence; and claim for Tehran the political momentum in a way that reinforced its narrative as a champion of anti-imperialist forces against the pro-Western camp in the Middle East.

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

> *Iran would portray the Arab uprisings as essentially an extension of the Islamic revolution, reflecting an aspiration that the overthrow of entrenched regimes—especially in Egypt—would pave the way for a political opening through which Iran could expand its political reach into the Arab World.*

In fact, the spread of the Arab Spring to Syria would confront Iran with a major strategic challenge to its Middle East policy. Not only would the anti-Assad protests pose a threat to Iran's primary Arab ally, but also Tehran's support for the Bashar Al-Assad regime challenged its political narrative of siding with the forces of popular revolution against autocratic governments. The Syria intervention thus exposed the limits of Iran's regional project. The deployment of the Iranian regular military alongside the Quds force and the array of pro-Iranian Shia militias has placed it along a path toward confrontation with Israel, and potentially, the United States. Moreover, the long-term viability of Iran's presence in Syria will be increasingly called into question in light of the re-imposition of sanctions by the United States and what appears to be growing domestic opposition in Iran itself to its regional adventurism in the midst of a burgeoning economic crisis.

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

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

The Demise of the Turkish Model

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

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

> *Turkey's foreign policy witnessed a pronounced shift toward regional engagement, with the Arab World emerging as a central focus of Ankara's outlook. This reorientation aimed to elevate Turkey's status to that of a major Muslim power able to shape the region's politics through a proactive diplomatic agenda.*

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

Against this backdrop, the onset of the Arab uprisings was seen as a major strategic opportunity for Ankara. Turkey's brand of secular democratic Islamism was projected as a role model and moderating influence for the emerging forces of political Islam in the Arab World and Islamist parties that came to power shortly after the uprisings. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, widely recognized as the architect of Turkey's foreign policy reorientation, would proclaim in 2012 that "we will be the owner, pioneer and servant of this new Middle East."

However, the regional transformations that unfolded in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings hampered Turkey's aspirations for leadership of the Muslim world. In particular, two developments combined to undermine the foundation upon which Ankara had based its regional vision. Contrary to its leadership's core strategic assumption that the Arab uprisings would portend the inexorable rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a natural political ally in the Arab World, the aftermath of the uprisings witnessed the demise of the Islamist political project. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war also presented Ankara with an acute security challenge. In addition to the burden posed by the influx of over three million refugees from Syria and Iraq, Turkey now had to contend with an incipient Kurdish presence in northwest Syria that would drag Ankara deep into the civil war there, a conflict over which it had little control.

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

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

In parallel with this marked militarization, Turkey's response to the unfolding events in the Middle East witnessed the articulation of a regional political identity based on what came to be referred to as "neo-Ottomanism." In stark contrast to the traditional pillars of pro-Western secularism that underpinned the political identity of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottomanism implied a type of religious legitimacy as the foundation for a vaguely defined notion of Turkish regional suzerainty. As expressed by President Erdoğan, neo-Ottomanism was a major strategic re-evaluation of Turkish foreign policy, not simply in terms of a specific national interest, but of the country's overall historic role in the region, and indeed, globally.

> *In stark contrast to the traditional pillars of pro-Western secularism that underpinned the political identity of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottomanism implied a type of religious legitimacy as the foundation for a vaguely defined notion of Turkish regional suzerainty.*

At times, neo-Ottomanism has veered into a latent irredentism. On more than one occasion, Erdoğan has questioned the Treaty of Lausanne, which drew the boundaries of the modern Turkish republic at the end of the First World War. This has been coupled with references to the vast expanse of territory that Turkey was forced to relinquish during the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. While the Turkish model may have appealed as a framework for Ankara's engagement with the Arab World, Turkey's increasing tilt toward more assertive neo-Ottoman policies has cost Ankara its standing with all but the few Sunni Islamist parties that rely on it for support.

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

Transcending the Arab–Israeli Conflict?

Of the three principal non-Arab regional powers, Israel has had the most consequential and sustained impact on the region's politics. The Arab–Israeli conflict has long constituted a defining feature of the modern Middle East, forming its core axis of conflict.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, its perennial conflict with the Arab World has formed a barrier to its integration with its regional neighborhood. As long as Israel continued to occupy Arab territory and forestalled the emergence of an independent Palestinian state, the prospect of normalizing relations with the Arab World remained politically unachievable. However, since the onset of the U.S.-led peace process during the 1990s—predicated as it was on the twin tracks of direct Arab–Israeli negotiations and regional multilateral cooperation—Israel has espoused a regional project intended to create political inroads into the Arab World itself, irrespective of the resolution of its conflict with the Palestinians.

> *Since the onset of the U.S.-led peace process during the 1990s Israel has espoused a regional project intended to create political inroads into the Arab World itself, irrespective of the resolution of its conflict with the Palestinians.*

The advent of the Arab uprisings offered a potential window of opportunity to advance this project. Israel's initial response to the uprisings was cautious, and mostly focused on warding off immediate security threats emanating from its proximate borders, particularly from the Syrian conflict, while at the same time agitating against the Barack Obama administration's nuclear diplomacy with Iran. With the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, much of Israel's focus shifted to countering Iran's growing military presence in southern Syria, a development that precipitated a major military flashpoint that periodically threatened to devolve into open armed conflict between Iran and Israel.

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

A number of developments indicated a cautious readiness on the part of certain Arab states to engage in such tacit cooperation with Israel, the most recent being the visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Oman in October 2018. While this was not the first such visit by a high-level Israeli official to a Gulf capital, it gained special notoriety, given the anticipation that this might lead to a breakthrough in relations between Israel and a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). More and more, the course of Arab interactions with Israel seemed to proceed independent of the Palestinian issue. Should this be taken to its logical conclusion—with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Gulf states and Israel—it would constitute a major transformation of the regional order.

Yet, despite these outward steps from the Arab World, the expectation that Israel would be able to transcend its conflict with the Palestinians has proved unfounded. While the Palestinian issue may have been overshadowed by other

conflicts, it remains a formidable barrier to the type of political normalization, let alone strategic cooperation, envisaged by Israel. In response to the Trump administration's decision to move the American embassy to West Jerusalem and recognize it as Israel's capital, Egypt led the charge at the United Nations reaffirming Jerusalem's status as occupied Arab territory, while Saudi Arabia would host a special Arab summit that would reaffirm Arab claims to the city as the capital of a future Palestinian state. These moves reflected a general Arab ambivalence to the Trump administration's attempt to coerce the Palestinians into accepting a settlement that clearly violates the tenets of the two-state solution, and achieves little beyond the formalization of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory.

> *In response to the Trump administration's decision to move the American embassy to west Jerusalem and recognize it as Israel's capital, Egypt led the charge at the United Nations reaffirming Jerusalem's status as occupied Arab territory, while Saudi Arabia would host a special Arab summit.*

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

Israel's regional goals have always been predicated on the strategic assumption that the status quo of occupation could be sustained indefinitely, its conflict with the Palestinians could be regionally and internationally marginalized, and its resolution deferred for the long term while it pursued its strategy of integration with the rest of the Middle East. The degree to which the Arab–Israeli conflict is undergoing profound transformation may ultimately prove this assumption to be deeply flawed.

Breakdown or Stabilization?
What has exacerbated the Arab condition of extreme regional instability is the inability of any of the major Middle Eastern or external powers to carve out a role that would compensate for the resulting loss of strategic certainty and provide the building blocks for an alternative order. While Russia has

successfully positioned itself as a key power broker through its military intervention in Syria, it cannot emulate, let alone supplant, the U.S.-led security system in the region. The divergence of interests between Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Syria make the emergence of a coherent bloc between these countries an unlikely prospect. Furthermore, the security guarantees for regional allies, extensive defense cooperation, custodianship of the Arab–Israeli peace process, and regional military presence that had been the cornerstones of U.S. policy, are unlikely to be replaced by any single actor, or a potential coalition of actors.

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

It is in this context that the role of the non-Arab periphery has gained greater salience. What distinguishes the aspirations of Iran, Turkey, and Israel is that they have each adopted a regional policy that goes beyond the search for strategic advantage within the old Middle East order. Rather, each of them has espoused a regional project that in many ways poses a fundamental challenge to that very order.

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

None of these projects, however, will succeed in their quest to reshape the Middle East or the Arab World. Eventually, the various attempts to reconfigure regional politics must confront the hard realities that hindered the emergence of an alternative order. The ideological makeup of the region will prove too diverse to impose any of these non-Arab frameworks as the basis for a new order moving forward. While the Arab core may have been weakened politically, this cannot negate the reality that a large swath of the Middle East remains ethnically and linguistically Arab. In many ways, this explains the transformation of the non-Arab challenge from a reliance on soft power ideational appeal to one that is increasingly dependent on hard military power. Stripped of their ideational cover, each of the non-Arab projects has devolved into militarized policies in the service of a narrow national—or at

times sectarian—interest, rather than a positive vision that would address the region's deep-seated conflicts.

The pillars of the old order are falling. However, the inability of any external actor or coalition of actors to forge an alternative order means that the Middle East has now entered a period of tremendous flux. The question of regional order is thus unlikely to be settled in the near term: the cracks in the foundation run deep, the challenge Arab countries face from non-Arab powers is acute, and the axes of conflict throughout the region have multiplied and become more entangled.

> *The pillars of the old order are falling. However, the inability of any external actor or coalition of actors to forge an alternative order means that the Middle East has now entered a period of tremendous flux.*

In the midst of this flux, two scenarios present themselves for the future course of regional politics. The first—and more dire possible future—is one in which the Middle East heads further toward breakdown. Further shocks can greatly exacerbate the region's already chronic instability; a creeping nuclearization as a result of the collapse of the JCPOA; the formal denouement of the two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; the dismemberment of one or more regional states, resulting in a trend toward balkanization; the shift from proxy conflict to direct state-to-state conventional war—possible between Israel and Iran in Syria, especially in the wake of a potential withdrawal of U.S. forces; and the outbreak of another iteration of the Arab uprisings that could potentially tip the Middle East from the current state of regional disorder to outright collapse.

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

This essay is an abridged version of a monograph originally published by the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore.