

## **Hierarchy and Instability in the Middle East Regional Order**

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### **Abstract**

There is an emerging hierarchical order in the Middle East that is both unstable and is also a source of instability. In the current regional setting, the inherent instability of this order is the result of a confluence of four mutually reinforcing developments. First, the global context has entailed a steady departure, or weakening, of the United States as an active interested power in the Middle East, opening up space among local aspirants for regional hegemony. A second factor is the competition among regional powers not only for the expansion of regional influence but also their power and position in the larger global order. Israel and Saudi Arabia seek to maintain the global status quo, while Turkey and Iran perceive of themselves as counter-hegemonic powers and seek to undermine the Western-engineered global order and hierarchy. Third, while some regional middle powers are more pragmatic in their foreign policy choices (i.e. “pragmatic” middle powers), some form alliances on the bases of ideological or identity affinity (i.e. “allied” middle powers), further deepening and prolonging tensions. Fourth and finally, the collapse of central authority in several Arab states following the 2011 uprisings—in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen—has provided the perfect opportunity for the regional powers, and even some of the secondary regional states, to expand their influence through local proxies and non-state actors. The combined features of the regional order in the Middle East are likely to inhere instability and tensions for the foreseeable future.

**Keywords:** Middle East, US, Regional Studies, Persian Gulf, Stability, Regional Order.

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**Mehran Kamrava** \*

### **Introduction**

The Middle East regional order has consistently demonstrated an inherent propensity toward tension and even crisis. Marking the latest catalytic event in the region's international relations, the 2011 Arab uprisings introduced new elements into the Middle East regional order and added additional layers of complexity to existing drivers of instability. Despite multiple studies regarding various aspects of the international relations of the Middle East after 2011, few of these have focused on the emergence of larger trends shaping shifting patterns in the distribution of power within and among the regional actors.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For an early study on the topic see, Sinan Ulgen, Nathan J. Brown, Marina Ottaway, and Paul Salem, "Emerging Order in the Middle East," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook, (May 2012). See also, F. Gregory Gause III. "Systemic Approaches to Middle East International Relations," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 1, Nol. 1, (Spring 1999), pp. 11-31.

This article addresses the ensuing gap in the literature on the international relations of the Middle East. More specifically, the article makes two interrelated arguments. As a starting point, the article points to an emerging hierarchical order in the Middle East in which there are a number of regional powers, followed by what may be classified as regional middle powers, and finally weak states. This hierarchical order, the article further argues, is itself one of the primary sources of instability since it is sustained by multiple, and often overlapping relationships between and within states in each of the three rungs.

The inherent instability of the Middle East regional order, the article argues, is the result of a confluence of four mutually reinforcing developments. First, the global context has entailed a steady departure, or weakening, of the United States as an active and interested power in the region, opening up space among local aspirants to compete for greater influence and even regional hegemony. The larger global context within which the Middle East finds itself today features an increasing diminishing of US influence and power in the region. The diversion of American attention elsewhere has not necessarily prompted other great powers to step in and fill a perceived military or political vacuum, with the European Union, Russia, and China having mostly commercial interests in the region or, as in Russia's case, only just beginning to make policy inroads in some of the region's hotspots such as Syria.

This larger global context has provided space and opportunity for Middle Eastern states to try and enhance their own positions both in their neighborhood and beyond. They have sought to do so by forging new regional friendships and alliances and by also taking advantage of the total or near collapse of central authority in a number of Middle Eastern countries after 2011. In the post-2011 era, there are four of these regional powers vying for greater influence and clout—namely Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. While two of these regional powers, Israel and Saudi Arabia, seek to maintain the global status quo, Turkey and Iran, perceive of themselves as counter-hegemonic powers and seek to undermine the Western-engineered global order and hierarchy. The competition among these powers and their efforts to expand their influence is a second cause of regional tensions and instability.

Third, of the countries in the middle tier of the hierarchy, some consider themselves as beneficiaries of the status quo. In fact, they see themselves as much closer in terms of identity to the two regional powers that have assumed the task of protecting the status quo on behalf of the US and the Western powers. Bahrain, the UAE, Egypt, and Jordan are much closer to Israel and Saudi Arabia because they identify themselves as “moderate Arabs” pursuing neoliberal economic agendas and sharing the same security concerns as the United States and its European allies in relation to Islamic extremism, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. These “allied middle powers” stand in contrast to a second group of countries in the same tier—Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia—whose policies are less doctrinal and more flexible, based not so much on shared identity features but guided more by strategic considerations. This group may be called “pragmatic middle powers”.

Strategy and identity at times come into clash and result in tensions. Qatar, for example, has pursued a hedging strategy that has resulted in maintaining open lines of communication with the likes of Iran, Hamas, and even the Taliban while still maintaining close diplomatic and security cooperation with the US and other Western powers.<sup>2</sup> But, in June 2017, the “moderate” Arab states of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt launched a vigorous diplomatic, political, and economic campaign against Qatar and accused it of harboring terrorism and causing regional instability.

On the receiving end of influence are a third group of countries in which the collapse or significant weakening of central authority has made their states weak and vulnerable to external diplomatic, financial, or military pressures. Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and Libya belong to this category of countries, whose structural weaknesses and vulnerabilities expose them to machinations of the regional powers and their state and non-state allies. Either directly or through their allies and proxies, the regional powers’ efforts at enhancing their positions in these weak or collapsing states have deepened their dysfunction. This constitutes a further, fourth cause of instability in the Middle East.

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2. For a discussion of Qatari foreign policy hedging see, Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 72-88.

In addition to its own inherent instability, the Middle East's regional hierarchy further contributes to the region's tensions because of the complex set of relationships that underlie the interactions of its members with one another and between them and external powers. At the top of the pyramid, Israel and Saudi Arabia perceive of themselves as the stalwarts of the status quo and base their relations with the United States and with the rest of the international community accordingly. Turkey and Iran, however, see themselves as counter-hegemonic actors whose interests are not necessarily advanced through existing international arrangements. Each of these four powers have their own relationships with and postures and priorities toward the region's middle powers and weak states: Israel and Saudi Arabia have reached a *modus vivendi* that has brought them closer today than ever before, and both compete with and seek to undermine Iran and its regional influence whenever and wherever possible. Saudi Arabia, in close collaboration with the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, is seeking to rein in Qatar's comparatively independent foreign policy. Its efforts in Syria having reached a deadlock, the kingdom has also allied with the UAE in trying to ensure that Yemen does not fall into the Iranian orbit. Iran and Turkey are busily carving out spheres of influence in Syria, with Iran having already done so in Iraq and, through the Hezbollah, in Lebanon. Turkey has also solidified its already strong relations with Qatar in the aftermath of the Saudi-UAE 2017 campaign against Qatar. Not to be outdone, the UAE, joined by an enfeebled Egypt, has sought to ensure that it has proxies of its own in positions of power and influence in Libya and in Palestine.

These intertwined relationships are far from permanent and are subject to frequent and at times abrupt shifts. The logics that underlie them are dictated by the combined imperatives of regime survival, balance of threat, and identity and ideological affinity. Whatever their specific cause, this complex of relationships only perpetuates the instability that is inherent in the emergent hierarchical order of the Middle East.

The article continues with an analysis of the broader global context within which the Middle East finds itself after 2011, focusing specifically on the roles played in the region, or in relation to it, by the US, the European Union, Russia, and China. As the section makes clear, shifting priorities by the global great powers have provided

space and opportunity by emerging powers within the Middle East to try and expand their own spheres of influence and their power in relation to other regional states. The article will then examine hierarchy and alliance formation in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. This will be followed by discussions of each of the four regional powers, then the secondary or middle powers, and finally the weak states. The article will conclude by highlighting the multiple and reinforcing causes of instability inherent in the Middle East regional order.

### **The Global Context**

Although historically the Middle East has been a highly penetrated system, over the last several years the nature and substance of the engagement of the global powers with the region has steadily changed. In this section I examine this changing relationship between the Middle East on one side and China, Russia, the US, and the European Union on another. I argue that while the United States and the EU, or at least the UK, continue to maintain significant military and political interests in the area, their leverage and influence over the region has seen precipitous declines in recent years. Despite maintaining significant troop strengths in the region in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the US has been far less actively involved in trying to dictate the course of events or influencing the behavior of states in the region. China and the EU, meanwhile, remained interested in the Middle East primarily for commercial and trade reasons, and late inroads made by Russia have seldom exceeded localized collaborative efforts with Turkey, Iran, and war-torn Syria.

This absence of a dominant onshore balancer has had important consequences for the Middle East, especially for both the status quo and for the revisionist states. Israel's "special relationship" with the US remains intact and, from one US administration to another, Israeli leaders see little or no substantive changes in their exceptionally close relationship with American policymakers. The substance of US-Saudi relations have also shown remarkable consistency over time. Nevertheless, during the Obama presidency, Saudi leaders feared being abandoned and having to fend for themselves against Iran. Iran and Turkey, meanwhile, have used the space created through less

direct US involvement in the region to challenge the dominant global and regional hierarchies in which they find themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Declining American influence in the Middle East in recent decades is a product of a combination of several developments. These include, most notably, changing US threat perceptions in the region; an increasingly pragmatic realism by American policymakers in dealing with the Middle East, especially after George W. Bush's disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq; and the growing importance of Asia in American global strategic calculations.

Historically, the central pillars of US foreign policy in the Middle East have included guaranteeing the safety and security of the State of Israel, ensuring access to the free flow of oil through the Persian Gulf, and containing threats emanating from the region to American interests.<sup>4</sup> Qualitative and significant changes to each of these threats have resulted in a steady lessening of the need for direct US presence and involvement in the region. Possession of nuclear weapons has nullified any existential threat Israel may have once felt from other Middle Eastern states.<sup>5</sup> The so-called "oil weapon" is also not what it used to be, since the US domination of a key segment of the oil supply chain, namely maritime transport, has bestowed it with "substantial coercion capacity against both major oil importers and major oil exporters that rely on maritime transport."<sup>6</sup> As for threats to American interests, Saddam Hussein was removed in 2003 and Iraq occupied; Iran was saddled with increasingly more punishing sanctions; and the once boisterous Qaddafi was neutralized long before he was overthrown in 2011. The one tangible threat that remained, and continues to remain, is terrorism.

Combatting what President Obama called "the persistent threat of

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3. In different ways and with different objectives, China, and Russia are also pushing back, as are Iran and Turkey, against the political settlement of the Cold War and have emerged as revisionist states. Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3, (May/June 2014), p. 73.

4. Michael C. Hudson, "The United States in the Middle East," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, 3rd ed. Louise Fawcett, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 323-327.

5. Zeev Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land: A Critical Analysis of Israel's Security and Foreign Policy*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 301.

6. Llewellyn Hughes and Austin Long, "Is There an Oil Weapon? Security Implication of Changes in the Structure of the International Oil Market," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 3, (Winter 2014/15), p. 187.

terrorism” remains one of the central tenets of US security strategy.<sup>7</sup> Despite official US rhetoric regarding the importance of reforms and liberalization in Egypt and elsewhere, repeated US administrations have shown a preference for authoritarian rule that would maintain the status quo over the implementation of substantive changes.<sup>8</sup> In Washington’s thinking, in fact, in places where central authority is intact the best way to counter terrorism is to simply give a free hand to regional despots who are pro-American. Apart from lending advice and logistical assistance when needed, there is no need to be actively involved in fighting terrorism so long as local allies can do a half-decent job.

Related to and reinforcing this is a pragmatic realism that has marked the foreign policies of recent US administrations toward the Middle East. Of these, the highly ideological approach of the George W. Bush administration was an aberration. The Bush White House had three main objectives in relation to the Middle East: defeating terrorism; stopping nonconventional weapons proliferation among adversaries; and actively promoting democracy. In each of these goals, it largely failed thanks to an over-emphasis on military force, insufficient reliance on diplomacy, and unwillingness to learn and to adapt, and contradictions among different policies.<sup>9</sup> Obama, by contrast, pursued a realist, “anti-doctrinal doctrine,” reminiscent of George W. H. Bush’s approach, that was mindful of the limits on the power and resources of the US to affect change.<sup>10</sup> The pragmatic, largely reactive stance the US took toward the Arab Spring was paradigmatic of Obama’s cautious, non-transformational policy toward the Middle East, reflecting his awareness of the cynicism of the world toward US preaching democracy.<sup>11</sup>

Raymond Hinnebusch has called the 1990-2010 interlude “the age

7. Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, (Washington, DC: The White House, 2015), p. 9.

8. William Lafi Youmans, “An unwilling client: how Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt defied the Bush administration’s ‘freedom agenda,’” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 4, (2016), p. 1209.

9. Jeremy Pressman, “Power without Influence: The Bush Administration’s Foreign Policy Failure in the Middle East,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4, (Spring 2009), pp. 149-150.

10. Fawaz Gerges, “The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America’s moment?” *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 2, (2013), p. 301.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 302, 304, 308. “We have to choose,” Obama is reported to have said, “where we can make a real impact.” Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, (April 2016), p. 77.

of US hegemony” in the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> But by 2006, with the war in Iraq not going as anticipated, the United States began realizing the limits of its power. By the following year the US had switched its strategy in the Middle East from one of confrontation to accommodation.<sup>13</sup> Soon thereafter, with its military withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, the US sought to return to a policy of offshore balancing.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, there has been a steady shift in the US’s attention eastward. Despite lofty rhetoric regarding a new relationship between the US and the Muslim world by Barack Obama, it was in fact Asia and not the Middle East that ranked high on the American president’s agenda.<sup>15</sup> Given Asia’s rapid economic growth and increased strategic importance, Obama believed, the US needs to “advance our rebalance to Asia and the Pacific.”<sup>16</sup> This “pivot to Asia” was important, according to Obama, because that is where America’s economic future rested, therefore requiring constant attention because of the challenges posed by China’s rise.<sup>17</sup> Trump has continued this tilt, though with a slight southern bend. While maintaining friendly and supportive relations with the Saudis, Trump has drawn the US closer to India as a potential counter to China’s growing influence and assertiveness.<sup>18</sup> Style and rhetoric notwithstanding, Trump’s foreign policy toward the Middle East has not veered off course from what appears to have become the norm, with the exception of renewed pressure on and tensions with Iran.

American attention and interests may have slowly lessened in the Middle East, but China’s have inversely grown. But these interests have been primarily economic and commercial and not political or

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12. Raymond Hinnebusch, “Foreign Policy in the Middle East,” in *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd. ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014), p. 54.
  13. Paul Salem, “The Middle East: Evolution of a Broken Regional Order,” *Carnegie Papers*, No. 9, (June 2008), pp. 17-18.
  14. Raymond Hinnebusch, “The Middle Eastern Regional System,” in *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd. ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014), p. 67.
  15. Gerges, “The Obama approach to the Middle East,” p. 300.
  16. Obama, *National Security Strategy*, p. 24.
  17. Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” p. 82.
  18. Mark Mazzetti, “Trump titles the political balance in South Asia,” *The New York Times*, (August 24, 2017), pp. 1, 4.

diplomatic. Energy is the dominant driver of China's expanding relationship with the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> A net oil importer since 1993, China sees the Middle East as a key energy source and an important market for its own exports. For their part, Middle Eastern oil producers also see China, which has steadily decreased its import of oil from the Middle East, as an important alternative market to the US.<sup>20</sup> By 2014, the latest year for which data is available, more than 52 percent of Chinese oil imports came from the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> Also, the Middle East has become central to the planned construction of two new Silk Roads that China announced in 2014.<sup>22</sup> By 2016, total Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Middle East and North Africa had shot up to \$27.8 billion from only \$3.4 billion in 2005.<sup>23</sup> In the Persian Gulf region alone, in 2014 some 74,000 Chinese nationals were estimated to be involved in various economic activities related to contract work, oil investments, and the construction sector.<sup>24</sup>

Such expansive trade and commercial relations have necessarily impacted China's diplomatic relations with the Middle East. Beginning in the 1990s, China started to engage in "pragmatic, low-profile diplomacy" in the Middle East, seeing the US military presence in the region as a "public good".<sup>25</sup> China's primary preoccupation since then has been to ensure the stability of the region and the security of trade and investments, especially oil supplies. Toward this end, it has followed a strict policy of non-interference. In certain instances, however, China has been involved in diplomatic initiatives designed to lower specific regional or localized tensions, as in the Iranian nuclear negotiations and between Sudan and South Sudan. Not wanting to challenge or replace the US as the primary

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19. John Calabrese, "China and the Persian Gulf: Energy and Security," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 3, (Summer 1998), p. 351.

20. Karim Mezran and Nunziante Mastrelia, "Looking for Oil: The New Chinese Activism in the Middle East," *Journal of Middle Eastern Geopolitics*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (2005), pp. 76-77.

21. Data collected from, Michal Meidan, Amrita San, and Robert Campbell, *China: The 'New Normal,'* (Oxford: The Oxford Energy Institute, 2015), <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/China-the-new-normal.pdf>.

22. Lars Erslev Andersen and Yang Jiang, "Is China Challenging the US in the Persian Gulf?" *Danish Institute for International Studies Report*, No. 29, (2014), p. 27.

23. Data collected from, American Enterprise Institute. *China Global Investment Tracker*. <http://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

24. Andersen and Jiang, "Is China Challenging the US in the Persian Gulf?" p. 28.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

security provider of the Middle East, China has pursued a policy of “active pragmatism” as its guiding diplomatic strategy in the region.<sup>26</sup> It has resisted repeated calls since the early 2010s to intensify its role in the Middle East and to add political and/or military dimensions to its commercial ties to the region. Although China is interested in big power involvement in the Middle East, it also seeks to engage in the region without intensive investments of its political, economic, and military resources.<sup>27</sup>

The European Union’s involvement in Europe is not that different. Despite their history of political machinations in the region, today’s members of the EU are also mostly interested only in commerce and trade in the Middle East. The EU’s outward FDI flows into the MENA region added up to \$170.7 billion in 2015, registering an increase of 8 percent over the previous year.<sup>28</sup> But such extensive commercial ties have not translated into in-depth policy engagement with the Middle East, with the exception of course of the Iran nuclear file. The EU’s insistence on the pursuit of normative foreign policy principles has created obstacles and shortcomings in its search for a long-term strategy for dealing with a region of political, economic, and strategic importance. Despite a wide array of interests in the areas of trade, regional security, terrorism, and migration, therefore, the EU’s foreign policy output in relation to the Middle East remains rather limited.<sup>29</sup> This limited impact is most evident in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the EU’s “good international citizen” posture has failed to affect any meaningful change on the ground.<sup>30</sup>

For its part, Russia has steadily increased its engagement with the Middle East since the mid-2000s. Russian strategy appears to be designed to improve its short-term economic, military, and political advantages while reducing the short-term advantages of prospective

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26. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

27. Yoram Evron, “China’s diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East: the quest for a greater-power role in the region,” *International Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 2, (2017), p. 125.

28. European Commission, Directorate General for Trade, data collected through <http://trade.ec.europa.eu>.

29. Thomas Demmelhuber and Christian Kaunert, “The EU and the Gulf monarchies: normative power Europe in search of a strategy for engagement,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 3, (2014), pp. 574, 586.

30. Asef Siniver and Luis Cabrera, “‘Good Citizen Europe’ and the Middle East Peace Process,” *International Studies Perspective*, Vol. 16, (2015), p. 214.

adversaries. If there is a strategy to Russia's relations with the Middle East, it is short-term and transitional. This seemingly "astrategic" approach prompted Russia to respond to the Arab Spring on a case-by-case basis, adopting a pragmatic, non-ideological approach to the region. At a broader, regional level, Russian foreign policy in the Middle East seems designed to support existing government structures against external intervention and internal insurrections. This policy is motivated largely by Russia's desire to prevent the spread of international terrorism to its borders and to its neighboring states.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its latter-day activism in the Middle East, neither the nature nor the extent of Russian influence in the region have turned it into a decisive power in organizing or even influencing the regional order. In fact, Russian, or for that matter American, Chinese, or EU activism and engagement with the Middle East do not automatically translate into influence over the region's emerging hierarchic order or its shifting alliances. This relative absence of an external organizing power, or powers, has given a comparatively free hand to regional state actors to try and shape the regional hierarchy to their own liking and to enter into alliances that would support their position within it.

### **Hierarchy and Alliance Formation in the Middle East Regional Order**

In this section, I examine the nature of the hierarchical order in the Middle East and the dynamics that underlie the alliances that draw together countries at one level of the pyramid with those at lower levels. Some decades ago, A. F. K. Organski likened the international order to a pyramid that has a dominant power at the top, followed by great powers, then middle powers, small powers, and finally dependencies.<sup>32</sup> I adopt this model but modify it to the Middle East regional system. In the post-2011 Middle East, the pyramid has four states at the top—Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran—with the former two perceiving of themselves as guardians of the international and regional status quo and the latter two conceiving of themselves as counter-hegemonic states (figure 1).

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31. James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable and Sarah Grand-Clement, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), pp. 2-4, 10.

32. A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968), p. 364.

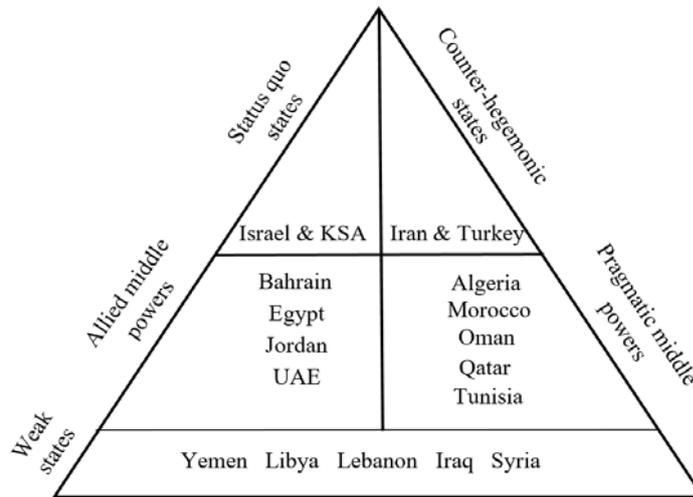


Figure 1. Hierarchy in the Middle East regional system

At the second rung of the pyramid are a number of regional secondary or middle powers. This group includes states with varying levels of power, size, ambition, and resources. What brings them together is not the degree to which they are “system influencing” or “system affecting” states—Robert Koehane’s definitions of secondary and middle power, respectively.<sup>33</sup> Instead, they are regional middle powers by virtue of their size and resources (Bahrain, Jordan, and Tunisia), or because they have decided to take a lower profile in the region even though their size and resources afford them regional power status (Algeria). Egypt, once the self-ascribed leader of the Middle East, also belongs to this category today, owing its financial solvency after 2013 to the largesse of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and therefore often acceding to Saudi leadership on regional matters.

Among the regional middle powers, some states view themselves as part of a “moderate” camp and actively promote an image of themselves as bastions of regional stability and the Western-anchored global and regional orders. This shared identity forms an important component of their choices of friends and foes. For these *allied* middle

33. Robert O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemma: Small States in International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (Spring 1969), pp. 295-296. In my categorization here, I have merged secondary and middle powers together and use the designation interchangeably.

powers—namely Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE—identity tends to assume greater primacy in forming alliances as compared to other strategic considerations.

The other category of regional middle powers—Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia—tend to be more pragmatic in their foreign policy pursuits, entering into cooperative agreements and friendships based less on ideological and identity factors and more out of pragmatic and strategic considerations. I have labeled these as *pragmatic* middle powers.

At the bottom of the pyramid are weak, divided, or collapsing states mostly on the receiving end of regional power plays and with little role themselves in affecting change to the regional order. They include Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. No actor in the international system, no matter how weak, is completely without agency. Iran's direct and indirect military presence in Iraq and Syria, for example, would not have been possible without complicity and agreement by officials in Baghdad and Damascus. Nevertheless, it is the regional system that by and large dictates the behavior of these weak states; for most others, it is their behavior that shapes or at least influences the regional order rather than the other way around.<sup>34</sup>

This hierarchy is itself a source of instability for two main reasons. To start, in nearly all hierarchies there are states that resent their placement in the lower rungs and their treatment by those at the top.<sup>35</sup> In the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—tried to shape the post-Arab Spring regional order in the Middle East.<sup>36</sup> But at different times and under different circumstances, this imposed order has been resisted by Egypt, Qatar, and the UAE. Organski argues that a rapid rise in the power and resources of middle powers can increase dissatisfaction with the status quo.<sup>37</sup> This has been especially the case with Qatar, whose projection of power and influence—incommensurate with its size and stature—has provoked the ire of Saudi Arabia and its allies.

Reinforcing this instability has been the pervasiveness of ideological multipolarity at different levels of the hierarchy, which

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34. Keohane, "Lilliputians' Dilemma," p. 295.

35. Organski, *World Politics*, p. 367.

36. Hinnebusch, "The Middle Eastern Regional System," p. 68.

37. Organski, *World Politics*, p. 367.

arises when there are “a number of prominent, distinct ideological groups that are present in a particular system.”<sup>38</sup> The greater the ideological difference among leaders, the higher their perceived threats from each other. The states at the top of the pyramid tend to be particularly ideological—or, more accurately, are perceived by each other as such—and therefore the distrust and tensions that mark them are all the more acute. Conversely, the greater the ideological similarity among leaders, the lower the perceived danger to their core interests. By itself, power multipolarity does not necessarily cause instability. But when a system is marked by both power and ideological multipolarity, then instability is highly likely.<sup>39</sup>

In the post-Arab Spring era, the alliances that underlie the Middle East regional system are formed because of three primary, interrelated reasons. These include regime security, balancing against threats, and identity factors. In the Middle East as elsewhere, small or weak states in particular must maneuver—make alliances and devise appropriate policies—in order to prosper and to survive.<sup>40</sup> A number of scholars of the Middle East point to calculations of regime security as the most important consideration in determining alliances.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the conduct of Egypt’s post-coup regime, for whom badly-needed financial lifelines have been key to its survival. Shortly after coming to power in 2013, President al-Sisi’s administration received \$5 billion in assistance from Saudi Arabia, \$4 billion from Kuwait, and \$2 billion from the UAE.<sup>42</sup> By 2015, Saudi aid to Egypt was estimated at around \$10 billion, and in early 2017 the kingdom also agreed to provide Egypt with 700,000 tons of oil

38. Mark L. Haas, “Ideological Polarity and Balancing in Great Power Politics,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 23, (2014), p. 715.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 717.

40. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemma,” p. 300.

41. See, for example, F. Gregory Gause III, “Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing in the new Middle East Cold War,” in *International Relations Theory in a Changing Middle East*, *POMEPS Studies* 16, (September 17, 2015), p. 18; and, Curtis R. Ryan, “Regime security and shifting alliances in the Middle East,” in *International Relations Theory in a Changing Middle East*, *POMEPS Studies* 16, (September 17, 2015), pp. 42-46.

42. Mohsoin Khan and Richard LeBaron, “What Will the Gulf’s \$12 Billion Buy in Egypt?” *Atlantic Council*, (July 2013), <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/what-will-the-gulfs-12-billion-buy-in-egypt>.

products every month for five years.<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, Egypt's has toed Saudi Arabia's line ever since regarding regional issues, having in the process relegated itself to a Saudi client state. Much earlier, and much more substantively, the Bahraini regime also placed itself firmly in the Saudi orbit in return for the kingdom's protection and largesse.

Closely related to regime security is power-balancing against threats, which also constitutes one of the biggest priorities of foreign policymakers in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup> In the post-2011 period, these threats are just as likely to be internal as external, especially since many states have begun patronizing foreign proxies in order to expand their spheres of influence abroad. The alliance of the Syrian regime with Iran, for example, is meant to safeguard it from the insurgency by the Islamic State group as well as by militia funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In many instances, the distinction between internal and external threats is not clear, or is deliberately conflated by political leaders. Bahrain's alliance with Saudi Arabia, for instance, is meant to protect the Bahraini monarchy from perceived threats from the country's Shia population and also from Iran. The post-2011 Saudi-UAE alliance is also rooted in their common threat perceptions toward Iran, as is, more recently, Israel's increasing closeness with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>45</sup>

A third factor underlying alliances in the post-Arab Spring Middle East is identity. Particularly for states with a strong ideological component to their identity, conceptions of self-identity and distinctiveness become central to their choice of friends and foes. Challenges to these states' sense of distinctiveness triggers anxiety and insecurity, in turn reinforcing the distinctiveness of one's identity and demonizing the other.<sup>46</sup> Saudi Arabia, for example, finds challenge to the distinctiveness of its identity especially threatening to

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43. Frederic Wehrey, "The Authoritarian Resurgence: Saudi Arabia's Anxious Autocrats," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (April 2015), p. 72; Heba Saleh and Simon Kerr, "Saudi Arabia to Start Egyptian Oil Shipments," *Financial Times*, (March 16, 2017), <https://www.ft.com/content/9896514e-0a57-11e7-97d1-5e720a26771b>.

44. Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policy in the Middle East," p. 17.

45. John Irish and Andrea Shalal, "There's an alliance growing between Saudi Arabia and Israel — and Iran should be worried," *Business Insider*, (February 19, 2017), <http://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-and-israel-anti-iran-alliance-2017-2>.

46. May Darwich, "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity: Wahhabism Versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, (2016), p. 470.

its security. Saudi foreign policy—and its deep antagonism to Iran, the Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)—is motivated by a quest for what May Darwich calls “ontological security” and the uniqueness of its claim to be the diplomatic leader of the Muslim world and the only interpreter of Islam’s engagement with politics. But the Iranian revolution and the political ascent of the MB in Egypt in 2012 threatened the distinctiveness of the identity of Saudi Arabia.<sup>47</sup>

System similarities are also important, especially when it comes to relations among the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and between the GCC and Jordan and Morocco, both of which also have monarchical systems. Foreign policy actors tend to support abroad the same kinds of political structures they have at home. A sense of legitimacy is derived if others adopt a system that is similar to what one has: “my system looks better if others are also using it.”<sup>48</sup> This applies to broader policy choices that bear on the state’s overall profile and the identity it seeks to promote abroad. So long as states do not threaten each other’s “ontological security,” their common profile as supporters of the status quo draws them closer and distances them from those advocating revisionism.

These three sources of alliances—regime security, threat balancing, and identity factors—have been particularly instrumental in forging close, cooperative relations between the two status quo powers, namely Saudi Arabia and Israel, and the allied middle powers of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE. As their designation implies, the *pragmatic* middle powers have adopted less doctrinal and identity-based criterion for their relations with those at the tip of the regional pyramid. All three sources of alliance, meanwhile, have been at work in driving the agendas and priorities of the regional powers in relation to the weak states of Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.

### **The Four Regional Powers**

At the top of the Middle East regional hierarchy sit the four powers of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. Each of these countries fits

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47. Ibid., pp. 470-471, 483.

48. Ewan Stein, “Beyond ‘geosectarianism’: political systems and international relations in the Middle East,” in *International Relations Theory in a Changing Middle East*, POMEPS Studies 16, (September 17, 2015), pp. 68-70.

the four major criteria that regional powers often share: claim to leadership; possession of necessary power resources; employment of successful foreign policy strategies; and, for the most part, acceptance of leadership role by other states in their region.<sup>49</sup> Israel and Saudi Arabia are status quo states, and omnibalance with global patrons in order to contain regional and transstate threats. As revisionist states, Turkey and Iran reverse omnibalance in order to mobilize regional alliances against Western powers and their regional allies.<sup>50</sup> As such, they perceive of themselves as counter-hegemonic actors that challenge the prevailing international and regional orders.

The beginnings of the present regional order in the Middle East can be traced to the mid-1980s, when the MENA region was witness to a multipolar struggle for power among several contending states, none of which was quite powerful enough to emerge as an uncontested regional hegemon.<sup>51</sup> Once the Cold War ended, the region witnessed a steady ascent of Sunni powers aligned with the US, namely Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, and the dual containment of Iran and Iraq.<sup>52</sup> But the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq gave Iran the opportunity to steadily build-up and expand its influence in its war-torn neighbors to the east and the west, and by the 2000s Iran had emerged as a dominant player in regional affairs. Egypt, meanwhile, had begun experiencing steady political atrophy at home and loss of influence abroad, exemplified most dramatically by the January 25, 2011 revolution, the 2013 coup, and the willingness to toe the Saudi line in regional affairs starting especially in 2014. For its part, under Erdoğan's increasingly confident and erratic rule, Turkey moved steadily from a status quo state to one seeking to shape the regional order according to its own preferences. After 2011, Turkey and Iran could be lumped together as the two regional powers most vociferously opposed to what they perceived as a hegemonically-engineered regional order.

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49. Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Troubled Middle East," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (2014), p. 204.

50. Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policy in the Middle East," p. 34.

51. Hinnebusch, "The Middle Eastern Regional System," p. 51.

52. Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics," p. 70.

## Israel

Within the Middle Eastern region, Israel's great power status is guaranteed by virtue of its special relationship with the United States and its possession of nuclear weapons. Though undeclared, Israel's nuclear arsenal has given the small state almost complete impunity with regards to its militaristic foreign policy and its penchant for pre-emptive military strikes. In Israel's case, its regional power status has been underwritten by its dominant hard power in relation to foes near and far, reinforced by the protective security umbrella of the United States.<sup>53</sup> Although in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring it appears as if Israel was one of the big "losers" of the Middle East's evolving power structure, within a few years it once again found itself in an unassailable regional strategic position. This was done by Israel drawing itself closer to the Saudi-Emirati axis. The closeness between Israel and Saudi Arabia and its allies was reinforced in the lead-up to and the immediate aftermath of the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the world powers, coupled with US and Iran's shared enmity toward the Islamic State and the faint possibility of collaboration between them.<sup>54</sup>

Identity and strategic factors have combined to evolve into an alignment of Israeli interests with those of Saudi Arabia and the allied middle powers. One of the important ways in which Israel identifies its allies is that they share with it some features of its self-perception. In contrast to the states they view as irrational and radical, Israeli leaders see their own country as moderate, committed to the status quo, and a source of regional stability. Israel assumes that members of the moderate axis share these characteristics and therefore can be potential allies.<sup>55</sup> Israeli leaders see Israel as part of a region-wide "moderate axis" that is comprised of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan the UAE, and Bahrain. Beginning in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the moderate axis conception has been reaffirmed and strengthened after the 2011 Arab uprisings.

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53. Clive Jones, "The Foreign Policy of Israel," in *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014), p. 293.

54. Itamar Rabinovich, "Israel and the Changing Middle East," *Brookings Middle East Memo*, No. 34, (January 2015), p. 10.

55. Yaniv Voller, "From Periphery to the Moderates: Israeli Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 130, No. 3, (2015), pp. 508, 510.

Reinforcing the importance of Israel's shared self-perception with the "moderate" states of the Middle East are a number of strategic factors that have drawn the two increasingly closer in recent years. The Arab Spring increased Israel's geostrategic insecurity and heightened concerns over the regional balance of power. The uprisings also confronted Israeli leaders with the possibility that popular revolutionary movements in places like Egypt and Tunisia may result in tangible national, technological, and military progress in these countries, thus eroding or lessening Israel's technological and military superiority.<sup>56</sup> Israel also became alarmed that largely democratically elected, moderate Islamist leaders in Turkey, Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia, joined by Qatar and Hamas, would pose a credible challenge to its standing and its regional priorities.<sup>57</sup> Given that Turkey is not interested in extensive diplomatic ties with Israel, and that Iran remains hostile, Israel's most feasible choice was to improve relations with supposedly moderate Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and its Persian Gulf allies, al-Sisi's Egypt, and Algeria.<sup>58</sup>

In the post-Arab Spring environment, Israel is faced with two pressing policy challenges. By far the most vexing of the two is Syria, whose civil war has unleashed a host of unforeseen developments with largely detrimental strategic consequences for Israel, especially in the form of Islamic State radicalism close to Israeli borders and expansive Iranian presence and influence across Syria.<sup>59</sup> The other challenge, somewhat self-made, is the portrayal of Iran as "enemy No. 1" and the need to be seen as actively confronting what Israeli leaders have constructed as an existential threat.<sup>60</sup> In both of these strategic challenges, Israeli interests converge with those of Saudi Arabia and the allied middle powers.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Within the larger Middle East, Saudi Arabia is militarily too weak

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56. Philipp O. Amour, "Israel, the Arab Spring, and the unfolding regional order in the Middle East: a strategic assessment," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3, (2017), p. 294-297.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

58. Rabinovich, "Israel and the Changing Middle East," pp. 5-6

59. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

60. Gareth Potter, "Israel's Construction of Iran as an Existential Threat," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1, (Autumn 2015), pp. 43, 45.

to dominate others. The best it can strive for is to prevent the rise of other hegemonies. Within the Arabian Peninsula, nonetheless, it can indeed dominate the other smaller states, and has done so successfully in relation to Bahrain, and is trying to do so in Yemen.<sup>61</sup> In its endeavors, the kingdom has used the GCC as an institutional forum to establish dominance over the small Sheikdoms. Riyadh has also been able to use its position as leader of the Muslim world in order to advance its foreign policy goals and agendas.<sup>62</sup>

The fundamental goals of Saudi foreign policy are to protect the country from foreign invasion and domination, and to safeguard the domestic stability of the Al-Saud regime.<sup>63</sup> In pursuit of these overriding objectives, the kingdom has found itself an increasingly proactive and assertive actor in the Middle East. This assertiveness dates back to the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when Saudi Arabia assumed that Iraq had regional hegemonic ambitions, and that both Iran and Yemen would also pose security threats to the kingdom.<sup>64</sup> This more assertive regional profile picked up pace after the Arab Spring, when the Saudis rallied support to lead a region-wide counter-revolution designed to contain and to perhaps even reverse the political and diplomatic consequences of the uprisings.<sup>65</sup>

As with Israel, identity factors constitute one of the central guiding principles of Saudi foreign policy and the kingdom's choices of friends and foes. Saudi Arabia's animosity toward Iran is rooted as much in identity issues as it is strategic. The Iranian revolution's claim to be the protagonist of "true Islam" exposes Saudi Arabia's vulnerability and its insecurity in the face of a similar claim. Not surprisingly, representations of the "Saudi Sunni Self" as contrasted with the "Iranian Shiite Other" figure prominently in Saudi foreign policy.<sup>66</sup>

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61. F. Gregory Gause III, "The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia," in *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014), p. 189.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

64. Joseph Kechichian, "Trends in Saudi National Security," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 2, (Spring 1999), p. 232.

65. Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 1, (Winter 2012), pp. 96-104.

66. Darwich, "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity," p. 477, 480.

The same issue explains Saudi hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood. By 2012, by which time the kingdom had well re-established its uniqueness in relation to Iran, it had to contend with the rise of the MB in Egypt.<sup>67</sup> Saudi Arabia therefore sought to portray the MB as opportunistic Salafists and accused them of “pragmatism” and lacking in true conviction. In an effort to emphasize its distinctiveness, Saudi Arabia has been slowly shifting its identity narrative from pan-Islamism first to Sunni Islam and then increasingly to Salafi-Wahhabism.<sup>68</sup>

Reinforcing identity threats by Iran are the strategic challenges the Islamic Republic poses to the kingdom. As a status quo power, Saudi Arabia sees Iran’s revisionism as inherently destabilizing and a threat to its own interests and the interests of its allies. Iran’s expansive influence in Syria and Iraq, and its alleged close ties to Houthi rebels in Yemen, are seen as direct threats to Saudi interests and objectives. For Riyadh, the competition with Iran has assumed the form of an existentially-motivated crusade, an effort to undermine and undercut Iran whenever and wherever possible. Iran, for its part, has responded in kind, though perhaps with slightly less zeal. In addition to soft power, Saudi Arabia has used financial incentives to win allies and partners, especially in Africa, while Iran has been expanding its influence in West Africa through the creation of Hezbollah-like proxy groups such as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria.<sup>69</sup> Faced with setbacks in Syria and Yemen, Saudi Arabia has been trying to force a change to Lebanon’s ambivalent regional alignment. In February 2016, the kingdom withheld a \$4 billion aid package to Lebanon in retaliation for Lebanon’s “official neutrality” in Saudi-Iranian tensions. Saudi Arabia also spearheaded a campaign to have the GCC and the Arab League declare the Hezbollah a “terrorist organization”. This policy is likely designed to signal to other states to “pick a side” in the Saudi dispute with Iran.<sup>70</sup>

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67. *Ibid.*, p. 477.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 484.

69. Gerald Feierstein and Craig Greathead, “The Fight for Africa: The New Focus of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry,” *Middle East Institute Policy Focus*, No. 2, (2017), p. 1. Saudi Arabia, for its part, support Nigeria’s Izala Society. pp. 6, 8.

70. Benedetta Berti, “Saudi Brinkmanship in Lebanon,” *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (March 24, 2016), <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/63111>.

## Turkey

Turkey can be considered a “cusp state,” one that lies uneasily on the normative and political edge of an established region.<sup>71</sup> Long seeking to identify itself as European, in the 2000s, Turkey stopped perceiving of itself as a “bridge country” and instead saw itself as a “central country” that should be, according to former foreign minister Mehmet Davutoğlu, “always at the epicenter of events, whatever they may be.”<sup>72</sup> Under Davutoğlu, in addition to Central Asia and the Caucasus, Turkey began seeing the Middle East as a “zone of influence” and perceived of itself as an “order instituting actor.”<sup>73</sup> Impressive economic growth and repeated parliamentary successes, meanwhile, gave the ruling AK Party the confidence to pursue an activist foreign policy regionally. The growth and strength of the Turkish business sector, and the increasing internationalization of Turkish capital, combined to serve as the main driving forces of Turkey’s growing influence and presence in the Middle East and Africa.<sup>74</sup>

After the 2011 uprisings, Turkey sought to shape the Middle East in competition with the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, often seeing itself more as a leader of the Middle East region and less as its partner.<sup>75</sup> While initially somewhat successful, offering what seemed like an attractive model of Islamic democracy, Turkey’s diplomatic and political advances in the Middle East quickly yielded mixed results. The GCC states saw Turkey as an important potential ally against Iran and against possible Shia or Persian hegemony. But after the 2013 coup in Egypt, which Turkey vociferously denounced, the

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71. Philip Robins, “The Foreign Policy of Turkey,” in *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014), p. 328.

72. Bülent Aras, “Turkish Policy toward Central Asia,” SETA Policy Brief, No. 12, (April 2008), p. 3; Ahmet Sözen, “A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges,” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (2010), p. 109.

73. Soli Özel and Behlül Özkan, “Illusion versus reality: Turkey’s approach to the Middle East and North Africa,” FRIDE Policy Brief, No. 200, (April 2005), p. 3.

74. Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Revolutions,” p. 206.

75. Bilgin Ayata, “Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing Arab World: Rise and Fall of a Regional Actor?” *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (2015), p. 97; Steven A. Cook and Hussein Ibish, “Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid Diverging Interests,” *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, Issue Paper, No. 1, (2017), p. 3.

Saudis and Emiratis tried to punish Turkey by freezing it out of regional diplomacy and cancelling investments in Turkey.<sup>76</sup> Turkish political elites also soon discovered that the country's ability to influence regional events is quite limited. Thus in relation to Syria, for example, Turkey has reluctantly come to pursue a flexible, often inconsistent, policy. Over-activism, in fact, has brought Turkey increased security risks without necessarily enhancing its position as a key actor in resolving the Syrian crisis.<sup>77</sup>

While Turkey and Iran are far from allies, at the top of the regional hierarchy Turkey's priorities more closely parallel Iran's than those of either Saudi Arabia or Israel. If there is a regional order, Turkish leaders assume, then it should be Turkey and not some outside Western powers and their regional allies that organize it. In this sense, Turkey shares with Iran a perception of itself as a "counter-hegemonic" actor, maintaining that its region's order should be a regional matter and not one dictated by the United States or Europe. In its pursuits, both identity and strategic considerations have guided the country's actions.

In addition to security and economic considerations, one of the main driving forces of Turkish foreign policy has been identity considerations and "civilizational geopolitics," especially in terms of Turkey's increasing focus on the Arab Middle East.<sup>78</sup> In the 1990s, there was much enthusiasm among Turkish policy circles for a "Turkish world from the Adriatic to the Chinese wall." These expectations, initially unsuccessful, were revived in the 2000s.<sup>79</sup> At around the same time support for Europeanization declined in Turkey, slowly leading to the policy elite's decision not to press hard for EU membership.<sup>80</sup> In the meanwhile, AK Party's foreign policy began exhibiting a new kind of nationalism, one with conservative and religious undertones, yet one that is outward facing and globalist at the

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76. Cook and Ibish, "Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid Diverging Interests," pp. 5, 8.

77. Turkey's Syria policy has been based on a series of miscalculations, with Erdogan overestimating his leverage over Assad, underestimating the resilience of the Assad regime, and assuming the international community would commit to Assad's overthrow. Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions," pp. 211, 214.

78. Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions," p. 206.

79. Aras, "Turkish Policy toward Central Asia," p. 1.

80. Stephen F. Larrabee, "Turkey's New Geopolitics," *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 2, (2010), p. 173.

same time.<sup>81</sup> This has prompted a number of observers to consider Turkey's expansive efforts at projecting economic and soft power as a manifestation of "neo-Ottomanism." Lacking a clear and agreed-upon definition, neo-Ottomanism has come to represent Turkey's emphasis on its historical identity and its centrality to regional affairs, especially in Central Asia and the Middle East.<sup>82</sup> For Turkey, "strategic depth" has meant capitalizing on cultural and historical ties with the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Balkans.<sup>83</sup>

Balance of power considerations, of course, are equally or even more important in guiding Turkish regional preferences and priorities.<sup>84</sup> Turkey considers its security environment to have changed from Europe to its immediate region, with most threats concentrated in its southern border.<sup>85</sup> For Turkish leaders, the country's "geographic depth" places it at the center of many geographical areas of influence, including the South Caucasus, Central Asia, West Asia, and the Persian Gulf region.<sup>86</sup> The decline of the Turkish military's influence in policymaking, meanwhile, has resulted in "broadening" and "softening" of Turkey's foreign policy in many respects.<sup>87</sup> Since the mid-2000s, the country has sought to expand its focus on economic matters in international relations with a focus on global good governance matters and engaging "air mile diplomacy".<sup>88</sup> As a means of enhancing its influence, Turkey in recent years has also diversified the nature of its relationship with international aid, conflict resolution and mediation efforts, and its presence in international organizations.<sup>89</sup>

Post-2011 developments, especially in Egypt, Gaza, and Syria drew Qatar and Turkey closer together through practical geopolitical

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81. Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions," p. 214.

82. Ahmet Sözen, "A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (2010), p. 108.

83. Larrabee, "Turkey's New Geopolitics," p. 159.

84. Emel Parlar Dal successfully argues that despite increasing normative rhetoric in its foreign policy, Turkey does not in fact pursue a normative foreign policy, one in which there are normative goals or normative results or impacts. Emel Parlar Dal, "Assessing Turkey's 'Normative' Power in the Middle East and North Africa Region: New Dynamics and their Limitations," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4, (2013), p. 709.

85. Larrabee, "Turkey's New Geopolitics," p. 158.

86. Sözen, "A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy," p. 109.

87. Larrabee, "Turkey's New Geopolitics," p. 161.

88. Robins, "The Foreign Policy of Turkey," p. 330.

89. Mesut Özcan, "Turkish Foreign Policy under the AK Party," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (Spring 2017), p. 9.

reasoning, drawing disapproval from the UAE and Saudi Arabia.<sup>90</sup> Whereas Qatar welcomes Turkish interests and activism in the Middle East, the UAE is concerned about Turkey's ideological influence in the region, wanting Turkey to be "an engaged regional power, but not too engaged, playing a major role, but not an overbearing one."<sup>91</sup> In the 2017 GCC crisis, much to the dismay of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Turkey stood firmly with Qatar, deepening its military presence there and opening food and supply lines to counter the effects of the boycott against the small emirate.

At least in relation to its immediate, unpredictable environment, Turkey represents a prime example of over-reach. Turkish leaders assumed that the "golden age" of Turkish soft power in the Middle East that began in the early 2000s would carry over into the post-Arab Spring era.<sup>92</sup> But the fluidity of events after 2011 have shown the limits of power and influence when a regional power tries to shape events, at times influencing events but at times also being influenced by them. Turkey represents a test case of the limits faced by and the opportunities presented to regional powers as they seek to influence regional affairs.<sup>93</sup>

## Iran

Iran also sees itself as a counter-hegemonic actor in the Middle East—in fact, perhaps even more so than Turkey, given its post-revolutionary experiences and its troubled relations with the US and America's regional allies. Ever since its establishment, the Islamic Republic has advocated the departure of US military forces from the Persian Gulf so that it can exert what it sees as its rightful authority over the region. To its Arab neighbors to the south, Iran has hegemonic ambitions that need to be kept in check by the United States. But for Iran, even more so than for NATO member Turkey,

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90. Özgür Pala and Bülent Aras, "Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in the Turkish and Qatari Foreign Policy in the Arab Spring," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, (2015), pp. 1-17.

91. Steven A. Cook and Hussein Ibish, "Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid Diverging Interests," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, Issue Paper*, No. 1, (2017), p. 1.

92. Soli Özel and Behlül Özkan, "Illusion versus reality: Turkey's approach to the Middle East and North Africa," *FRIDE Policy Brief*, No. 200, (April 2005), p. 2.

93. Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions," pp. 210, 216.

regional matters require regional solutions. Iran, the country's policymakers argue, cannot be expunged or excluded from its region, and in fact it must be allowed to play a central and constructive role in developments in its neighborhood.<sup>94</sup>

Iran, it might be argued, has had a relatively successful record in challenging the post-Cold War international order.<sup>95</sup> But in the process it has paid a heavy price, whether in the form of crippling economic sanctions or in ceaseless efforts by the United States to isolate it from global and especially regional affairs. A bypass mechanism has been cultivating ties with non-state actors in places closer to home—the Lebanese Hezbollah and militia forces in Iraq and Syria are prime examples—or in distant Africa and South America. Within the Middle East, American missteps in Iraq and Syria and developments elsewhere in the region have given Iran an edge in regional affairs.

In addition to its use of non-state proxies, Iran's influence on the Iraqi and Syrian governments and its on-the-ground presence in both countries has considerably increased in recent years. This has led to deep fear and skepticism of Iran among the likes of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt.<sup>96</sup> Qatar also remains skeptical of Iran, but it has maintained a pragmatic relationship with the Islamic Republic out of concern for the two countries' shared gas field in the Persian Gulf.<sup>97</sup> In summer 2017, when Saudi Arabia led a campaign to isolate and blockade Qatar, Iran joined Turkey in rushing food and supplies to the country, drawing the two closer together.

Despite these seeming strategic wins, Iran's regional successes have been far from unqualified. Robust internal debates and policy priorities within the Iranian state—between the offices of the Presidency and the civilian policymakers on the one hand and that of Leader and the IRGC on the other—cause frequent policy inconsistencies and, at times, even

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94. Javad Zarif, "Iranian Foreign Minister: 'Arab Affairs Are Iran's Business,'" *The Atlantic*, (October 9, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/iran-persian-gulf-jcpoa/542421/>. Zarif maintained "Arab affairs *are* Iran's business. And we are not shy in admitting that *non-Arab* affairs are *their* business. How can they not be?"

95. Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics," p. 74.

96. Frederic Wehrey and Richard Sokolsky, *Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015), p. 17.

97. Mehran Kamrava, "Iran-Qatar Relations," Gawdat Bahgat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Neil Quilliam, eds. *Security and Bilateral Relations Between Iran and its Arab Neighbors*, (New York: Macmillan, 2017), pp. 167-188.

tensions. Moreover, given that Iran's allies are often distant or are non-state actors, the Islamic Republic's ascendant influence does not seem sustainable and is, in fact, precarious.<sup>98</sup> And, apart from a brief interlude in the waning months of the Obama administration, the pressure from the United States has not let up, serving as additional constraints on Iranian ambitions and priorities. Similar to Turkey, but for fundamentally different reasons, Iran often finds its regional influence and ambitions undermined and curtailed.

Given its revolutionary heritage and its highly ideological political system, it would be natural to assume that identity plays an important role in Iranian foreign policy.<sup>99</sup> In reality, however, strategic calculations far outweigh ideological ones. That many of Iran's non-state and state allies happen to be Shia should not be misconstrued as the outcome of an ideologically-driven strategy. Ideological affinity is, of course, an added bonus. But balance of power—or, more accurately, balance of threat—considerations are also important.<sup>100</sup> Hezbollah, for example, is seen as a “significant strategic asset” by Iran and an integral part of its strategy of deterrence against Israel.<sup>101</sup> In more recent years, ISIS has also emerged as a strategic threat for Tehran, only adding to the significance of Hezbollah. Between Iran and the Hezbollah there is a “symbiosis between ideology and strategic assessment” that makes them mutually reinforcing and difficult to disentangle.<sup>102</sup> Conditioned by the experience of the 1980-88 war with Iraq and decades of tensions with the United States, Iranian policymakers, including Ayatollah Khamenei, are guided by assumptions of how to maximize the country's security in an ever-changing strategic environment through the acquisition of sufficient military power.<sup>103</sup> For Khamenei, personally, this defensive realism is

98. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “The Foreign Policy of Iran,” in *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014), p. 261.

99. For one such argument see, Walter Posch, “Ideology and Strategy in the Middle East: The Case of Iran,” *Survival*, Vol. 59, No. 5, (October-November 2017), pp. 69-98.

100. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 21-22.

101. Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Why does Iran need Hizbollah?” *The Muslim World*, Vol. 106, (January 2016), p. 127.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

103. Kayhan Barzegar and Masoud Rezaei, “Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking,” *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 3, (Winter 2017), pp. 27-54.

conditioned by moral, Islamic considerations, as made evident through his *fatwa* against the possession and use of nuclear weapons.<sup>104</sup>

Iranian foreign policy has historically been shaped by a fear of outside intervention, as made painfully evident in Iraq's 1980 invasion. The most significant security challenge for Iran continues to be the US military presence right outside its national borders and American and Israeli military and strategic intentions toward Iran.<sup>105</sup> As the country's policymakers see it, their active involvement in Syria and Iraq is meant to safeguard a strategic depth that would prevent Israel from a preemptive attack on Iran. Economic sanctions have also prompted a determined drive for economic self-sufficiency and, after 2005, the start of a "resistance economy".<sup>106</sup> The 2015 nuclear deal with the world powers somewhat lessened economic pressures and reduced Iran's international isolation. But it also heightened Saudi and Emirati fears of an ascendant Iran and led to their reinvigorated efforts, this time in a more sympathetic White House, to again isolate and marginalize the Islamic Republic. By and large, however, because of underbalancing, efforts by regional actors to check Iranian power have all failed, and a strong regional alliance against Iran has not come together.<sup>107</sup> What has resulted instead are heightened tensions across the region and a continuation of the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere.

### Regional Middle Powers

The second tier of regional hierarchy in the Middle East is occupied by two groups of countries that may be broadly labeled as *allied* and *pragmatic* states. States in both of these categories are largely supportive of the status quo and either do not have the resources and stature or the desire to seek a rearrangement of the

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104. Ibid., p. 47.

105. Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Invasion Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 4, (Winter 2008), p. 53.

106. Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," p. 264.

107. Gause, "Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing in the new Middle East Cold War," pp. 16-17. According to Randall Schweller, underbalancing occurs "where threatened countries have failed to recognize a clear and present danger or, more typically, have simply not reacted to it or, more typically still, have responded in paltry and imprudent ways." Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Fall 2004), p. 159.

regional order. Where they tend to differ, especially in the post-2011 regional order, is in their approach to the four regional powers in general and Iran in particular. Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE are all closely allied with Saudi Arabia and are also formally or informally close to Israel. Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia tend to pursue more pragmatic policies, if not being close to Iran and Turkey at least not having tensions with one or both of them.

In the following section I will highlight only one of the countries in each group—Egypt in the allied camp and Algeria in the pragmatic group. Each of these states could easily be considered as a regional power, and at some point did indeed play such a role. But for different reasons both have been relegated to the status of regional middle powers, Algeria voluntarily and Egypt somewhat reluctantly. Egypt, in fact, still acts as if it is a dominant power in war-torn Libya. But this dominance is both limited and is circumscribed by Egypt's financial and economic dependence on Saudi Arabia and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the UAE.

## Egypt

Since 2011, Egypt's ability to carry forward its policy preferences and to affect its regional environment has steadily decreased, a decline that had already gotten underway in the waning years of the Mubarak presidency. The 2011 revolution was, in fact, a major blow to Egypt's stature regionally and globally, having turned the country's image from a source of stability and support for the status quo to one of unreliability and a potential source of instability and chaos.<sup>108</sup> In actual practice, Morsi's foreign policy showed considerable continuity with that of Mubarak, except for two novelties, one being a limited opening to Tehran and the other a slight warming of relations with Hamas.<sup>109</sup> But the president's brief tenure in office nevertheless featured a number of constraints in Egyptian foreign policy. Significantly, given Egypt's economic and security difficulties, and despite his extensive travels abroad, Morsi had limited room to pursue a meaningful and

108. Abdel Monem Said Aly, "Post-Revolution Egyptian Foreign Policy," Middle East Brief, Brandies University Crown Center, No. 84, (November 2014), pp. 4-5.

109. Azzurra Meringolo, "From Morsi to Al-Sisi: Foreign Policy at the Service of Domestic Policy," Insight Egypt, No. 8, (March 2015), p. 3.

activist foreign policy. This was reinforced by the relative institutional autonomy of the Egyptian military, intelligence apparatus, and even the foreign ministry bureaucracy, therefore undermining the president's efforts to put his stamp on the country's foreign policy.<sup>110</sup>

With Morsi's fall, Egyptian foreign policy exhibited a sense of "Mubarakism without Mubarak." But this reversion has not translated into policy successes or, for that matter, an enhancement of Egypt's power and position within the regional hierarchy.<sup>111</sup> After al-Sisi's assumption of power, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait began bankrolling the Egyptian economy in order to keep it from collapsing. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's King Salman and the UAE Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed have assumed a far more assertive posture toward Egypt. This has come at a heavy political price, with Egypt "allowing itself to be moved, for example, as a pawn by these states on the international chess-board."<sup>112</sup> Today, in regional matters Egypt can hardly be said to have an independent foreign policy, having relegated itself to an obedient follower of Saudi and Emirati positions when it comes to issues such as disputes with Qatar, Iran, and Turkey.

This can be partly explained by President al-Sisi's focus on domestic economic and security issues and his deliberate relegation of foreign policy to the backburner. As one observer has noted, al-Sisi "has done nothing to revitalise Egypt's role on the foreign policy front, constantly subordinating it to issues of domestic policy."<sup>113</sup> But when he has tried to push through Egypt's interests, his success has been at best limited. In 2012-13, for example, Egypt tried but failed to be formally admitted into the BRICS.<sup>114</sup> Egypt has also failed to make much headway in its dispute with Ethiopia over Addis Ababa's construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam on the Nile, which will significantly reduce water flows into Egypt when completed. Despite Egypt's insistence that its "historic rights" to two-thirds of the waters of the Nile be respected, Ethiopia, joined by a number of African

110. Said Aly, "Post-Revolution Egyptian Foreign Policy," p. 2.

111. Raymond Hinnebusch and Nael Shama, "The Foreign Policy of Egypt," in *Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014), p. 101.

112. Meringolo, "From Morsi to Al-Sisi," p. 4.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

114. Said Aly, "Post-Revolution Egyptian Foreign Policy," p. 4.

states and most crucially by Sudan, remains adamant that Egypt get its “equitable” share of Nile waters. Despite Cairo’s repeated protestations, Ethiopia has pressed ahead with the dam’s construction.<sup>115</sup> And, in Libya, where its fears about the deterioration of the security situation and the spread of Islamic State and other Jihadist groups have prompted it to be militarily involved, Egypt’s successes have been minimal.<sup>116</sup>

Once the “leader” of the Arab world if not the whole of the Middle East, today Egypt has been relegated to a secondary, middle power position in the region. Deep and extensive economic dependence on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, combined with repeated internal shocks, have left little room for Cairo to maneuver freely. Perhaps Cairo is just buying time until it can reassert what it has always seen as its rightful historic leadership of its region. Until that day comes, Egypt continues to be at best only a regional middle power.

### **Algeria**

Similar to Egypt, Algeria may have the capacity and the potential to be a regional power, but, at least for the time being, it does not have the will and perhaps even the resources to play such a role. The last several decades have seen a steady, incremental, and quite deliberate shift in Algeria’s foreign policy pursuits and its positioning of itself in regional matters. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Algerian foreign policy was geared toward leadership of Third World causes and the non-aligned movement. This period of militancy was “the golden era of Algerian foreign policy based on the ideals of the Algerian revolution,” such as anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and structural reforms in north-south relations.<sup>117</sup> In the 1980s, President Benjadid slowly shifted Algeria toward regionalism, with the Maghreb Union as a mainstay of the policy. This focus was further narrowed in the 1990s, with much greater emphasis on national and more pragmatic interests. Since the 1990s, and into the present day, anti-terrorism has

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115. Fred H. Lawson, “Egypt versus Ethiopia: The Conflict over the Nile Metastasizes,” *The International Spectator*, (2017), DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2017.1333272, p. 8.

116. Mulberger, “Egypt’s Foreign and Security Policy in Post-R2P Libya,” p. 101.

117. Robert A. Mortimer, “Algerian foreign policy: from revolution to national interest,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, (2015), p. 471.

been a central plank of the country's foreign policy.<sup>118</sup> Today, Algerian foreign policy is aligned "more closely to the classic foreign policy objectives of defense of its territorial integrity."<sup>119</sup>

Algeria's inward focus began in the 1990s, often referred to as "the black decade," when the country was embroiled in a bloody and vicious civil war. Up until that point it had actually been Africa and not so much the Middle East that had played a central role in Algerian foreign policy. From the 1960s to the 1990s, Algeria played the role of developer, mediator, and anti-imperialist in Africa. Since the 1990s, that role has been one of combatting terrorism. Starting in 2013, Algeria began making a concerted effort to reclaim some of the diplomatic ground it had lost in the continent, becoming particularly active in the African Union.<sup>120</sup>

But even there, Algeria's influence has been somewhat limited, again it seems largely out of self-restraint. The Malian crisis of 2012-2013 illustrates the point. Quite unlike the spirit of Algerian foreign policy of earlier eras, when a coalition of Tuareg and Algerian Salafists took control of a large swathe of northern Malian territory in 2012 and threatened Algeria's southern border, President Bouteflika decided against sending troops to Mali and instead opted for strengthening Algerian border security in the south. In place of taking the lead on the matter, as Algeria would likely have done in earlier years, Algiers decided instead to allow French and American military flights over Algerian territory in NATO's effort to establish central authority in Mali.<sup>121</sup>

Whether by choice or out of necessity, Algeria's assumption of a secondary, middle power position within the regional hierarchy has not fundamentally altered power positions within and the geopolitics of the Middle East. In earlier years and today Algeria has always followed a pragmatic, independent foreign policy. If anything, today the country is more firmly ensconced in the Western-led fight against extremist terrorism. At least in the Middle East, however, it has

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118. Yahia H. Zoubir, "Algeria's Role in the OAU/African Union: From National Liberation Promoter to the Leader in the Global War on Terrorism," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (2015), p. 64.

119. Mortimer, "Algerian foreign policy," p. 477.

120. Zoubir, "Algeria's Role in the OAU/African Union," p. 55.

121. Mortimer, "Algerian foreign policy," p. 480.

retained its pragmatism and independence, toeing no one's line other than that decided in Algiers. Similar to those of Oman and Qatar, and to a somewhat lesser extent Tunisia and Morocco, Algeria's middle power status within the Middle East does not necessarily mean its alignment with the policies and objectives of one or more of the regional powers. It instead reflects the country's inability, or reluctance, to assume a leading position in regional issues.

### Weak States

At the bottom of the Middle East power hierarchy today are Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Lebanon, weak states that are on the receiving end of power and influence from the regional powers and/or their allies. A prime example is Syria, which "has gone from being a strong player in the Arab east to being a playing field."<sup>122</sup> In Syria and elsewhere, the breakdown of state institutions and services has prompted communities to seek protection with sub-state and regional actors.<sup>123</sup> Since the Arab Spring, there has been "a return to the weak Arab state," in which Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE compete for support and influence through local proxies. At its peak activism, Turkey's *modus operandi* was somewhat different; it tried to remove Bashar Assad from power by opening supply-lines for groups affiliated with Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Local proxies, of course, are not without agency and also invite and deal with outside patrons and regional state actors.<sup>124</sup>

For Yemen, Syria, and Libya, state weakness was precipitated when the social movements of 2011 degenerated into civil wars and central authority was significantly weakened. In each of these five cases, weakened or collapsing state institutions provided opportunities for the regional powers to enter the fray in pursuit of their objectives and through their own proxies. Local circumstances and dynamics may differ greatly from one case to another. But the outcome remains

122. Ulgen, Brown, Ottaway, and Salem, "Emerging Order in the Middle East," p. 13.

123. Helle Malmvig, "Coming in from the Cold: How we may take sectarian identity politics seriously in the Middle East without playing to the tunes of regional power elites," in *International Relations Theory in a Changing Middle East*, POMEPS Studies 16, (September 17, 2015), p. 35.

124. Bassel Salloukh, "Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State," PS, (July 2017), pp. 661.

the same, with regional powers using these weak states to further their own interests and to block and undermine their competitors. In Yemen, for example, the primary drivers of the conflict are local. But exaggerated assumptions about the supposed role of external players continue to affect the calculations of Yemeni and the other regional actors involved.<sup>125</sup>

In Iraq, central state authority has not been effectively restored since 2003, though the spillover effects of uprisings elsewhere did deepen the frailties of whatever functioning state institutions the country had. Much the same thing occurred in Lebanon, where the inherently weak institutions of the state have been even further strained in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. Lebanon has also been directly impacted by the Syrian civil war and by Saudi-Iranian rivalry.<sup>126</sup>

Civil wars are never permanent. After some time, the neighbors who turned on each other eventually stop fighting, go back to their lives, and resume their daily routines. But the intrusion of foreigners into the conflict, whether in the form of state or non-state actors, prolongs civil wars and increases their destructiveness. Foreign fighters have little attachment with the landscape in which they are fighting; they only care about winning. And their state sponsors care even less about the costs inflicted on local peoples and places; they also only want to win. Syria's descent from a player to a playing field was rapid; its ascent the other way, as with that of the other weak states, will most likely be anything but. For now, the Middle East's weak states are battlefields for the region's powerful.

## Conclusion

Some scholar have argued that there has been no meaningful regional order in the Middle East neither before nor after the 2011 uprisings.<sup>127</sup> This article has challenged this argument by pointing to the emergence of a three-tiered, pyramidal hierarchy in the Middle

125. Peter Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" Chatham House Research Paper, (February 2015), p. 1. While the Houthis enjoy some degree of support from Iran, they are far from being controlled by Tehran.

126. Benedetta Berti, "Saudi Brinkmanship in Lebanon," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (March 24, 2016), <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/63111>.

127. Ulgen, Brown, Ottaway, and Salem, "Emerging Order in the Middle East," p. 10.

East after 2011. At the top of the pyramid sit four states, with two seeking to preserve the regional status quo (Israel and Saudi Arabia) and the other two (Turkey and Iran) challenging its legitimacy. In the second tier are a host of middle powers, some of whom are closely aligned and allied with the status quo powers (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE), while others (Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia) pursue more independent policies and objectives. At the bottom are a group of weak states (Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria), whose weakened central authorities have opened up space for the intrusion of foreign actors and their proxies to try expanding their influence.

This regional hierarchy is one of the primary sources of instability in the Middle East. More specifically, the article points to four developments—the global context; the priorities of and the competition among the regional powers; the position and status of the region's secondary powers; and a proliferation of weak or collapsing states—that have combined to make the Middle East's regional order inherently unstable and prone to tensions and even crises.

Looking ahead, it is difficult to predict with any reasonable certainty whether and how long the Middle East's current regional hierarchy will last. The states at the top may find their ascendant fortunes reversed somewhat quickly, as was the case most starkly with Syria or, more gradually, with Egypt. The positions of Iran and Saudi Arabia at the top are particularly precarious, both wracked by policy unpredictability within the state and powerful opponents outside it. The UAE has now begun to punch above its weight the same way that Qatar did before 2013, and it is not inconceivable that it may emerge as a regional powerhouse in the coming years. And, perhaps, perhaps one day the tragedies that are today Libya, Yemen, and Syria will turn into viable states once again in which central authority can fend off outsiders who are out for their own interests. No power relationship lasts forever, and the ones in force in today's Middle East are bound to come to an end sooner or later. How they may evolve in the future is anyone's guess. What is certain is that for the foreseeable future the Middle East regional order will inhere tensions and instability.