



Fluctuating Regional (Dis-)Order in the Post-Arab Uprising Middle East

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Abstract

The Middle Eastern regional order has been undergoing profound changes in the current decade. These can be traced back to a reconfiguration of international and regional structures. On the one hand, shifts in US foreign policies towards the Middle East corresponded with new regional dynamics. On the other, the monarchies of the Arab Gulf have become more active in regional politics. In this contribution, we scrutinize these two changes and explore their interplay. We argue that a new regional order has emerged that can be characterized as a highly contested multipolar system in flux. Subsequently, three aspects that constitute and reinforce this disorderly regional system of the Middle East are discussed: first, the securitizing of policies by regional and extra-regional political leaders; second, the increasing disintegration of regional institutions; and third, the emergence of lasting war zones. The paper concludes with a discussion of the meaning of these profound dynamics for future aspects of Middle Eastern regional affairs.

The Middle Eastern regional order has been undergoing profound changes in the current decade. These can be traced back mainly to a reconfiguration of international and regional structures: on the one hand, shifts in US foreign policies towards the Middle East corresponded with new regional dynamics. Post-Second World War US engagement in Middle Eastern politics peaked with George W. Bush's presidency and started to be reduced under Barack Obama's and then Donald Trump's leadership. On the other hand, as an outcome of the Arab Uprisings in the early 2010s, the monarchies of the Arab Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) but also Qatar, have become more active in regional politics. Moreover, Iran saw the Arab Uprisings as an opportunity to increase its engagement in Syria and Iraq. And also Turkey attempted to engage more actively throughout the Middle East, whereas Israel followed a watching-and-waiting approach (Beck, 2016). The roots of both the shift in US policies towards the Middle East and the new dynamics in regional politics are structural: decreased US threat perception and reduced strategic interest in the Middle East on the one hand and increased threat perceptions and new strategic interests in the region on the other. These changing patterns of threat perception and interests occurred in the wake of a diminishing role of regional institutions in Middle Eastern affairs.

In this contribution, we scrutinize the two abovementioned structural changes and explore their interplay. We argue that a new regional order has emerged in the Middle East that can be characterized as a highly contested system

in flux. Subsequently, three contemporary aspects that reinforce this disorderly regional system are discussed: first, the securitization of policies by regional and extra-regional political leaders; second, the increasing disintegration of regional institutions; and third, the emergence of lasting war zones. The paper concludes with a discussion of the meaning of these profound dynamics for some crucial aspects of the future of Middle Eastern regional politics.

Shifting away from a US hegemony

At the latest after the end of the Cold War and until the first decade of the 21st century, the Middle East stood out as a world region whose hegemon, that is the regionally most powerful and dominating actor, was the USA (Beck, 2014; Gause, 2019). The merit of scrutinizing this important feature of the contemporary Middle East in this thematic section goes to Yom (2020), who discusses US Middle Eastern foreign policy and explains the end of American hegemony within the region. All other contributions, which focus on Middle Eastern relations in the strict sense, confirm Yom's findings by highlighting some of the ongoing consequences: Beck (2020) with regards to the diminishing role of the USA in the struggle for regional leadership, Richter (2020) in terms of the decline of US hegemony as a necessary condition of the emergence of new petro-aggressions in the Gulf, and Hinnebusch (2020) in reference to the battle of Syria's reconstruction with little to no US involvement after a devastating civil war. Last but not least, Darwich (2020)

highlights some of the conditions for lasting military interventions by regional actors under the new circumstances of diminishing US hegemony.

Yom (2020) certainly enriches an ongoing heated debate on the features and causes of the end of America's extremely intense and costly Middle Eastern engagement during and after the Cold War (Benaim and Hanna, 2019; Lynch and Jamal, 2019). He demonstrates that the end of US primacy in the Middle East is not a result of shrinking power capabilities, since the USA is still the by far most powerful actor in this world region with regard to this feature. The crucial argument is, rather, that the USA is no longer as committed as it used to be to deploying its superior power capabilities in the Middle East to the fullest degree because the region has ceased to pose a substantial threat to US interests. This is one of the main reasons why contrary to the military confrontations between the USA and Iraq in the 1990s and early 2000s, the 2019–20 Persian Gulf crisis has – at least for the time being – not escalated into a fully-fledged war.

The significance of the Middle East has diminished not only for US security interests but also for the stability of the world political economy, because the gravitational centre of global energy supply, which had switched from the Western to the Eastern hemisphere after the Second World War (Schneider, 1983), moved back to the Americas in the 2010s (Beck, 2019). Thus, the demise of American power in the Middle East is not about power as control over capabilities but about power as control over outcomes. Last but not least, Yom (2020) rebuts the popular interpretation that the end of the American hegemony in the Middle East is a result of Trump's presidency. In fact, it was Barack Obama's Administration that started implementing this new US approach when it withdrew its troops from Iraq and refrained from becoming fully engaged in the war on Syria. The fact that two US presidents that are very dissimilar in many respects share in substance a similar foreign policy approach towards the Middle East is another major indicator that the end of the age of American primacy in the Middle East reflects deep structural change.

Shifting towards regional actors' engagement

The partial US retreat from the Middle East certainly pushed regional actors – particularly allies who had become accustomed to intense US engagement in the Middle East – to take a more active stance in regional affairs (Hazbun, 2018). The decreased readiness of the USA to fully deploy and use its forces in the Middle East opened up opportunities to other extra-regional actors with much lower power capabilities than the USA but with a relatively high readiness to use them, particularly Russia and China (Dannreuther, 2019). Russia's engagement in the Syrian war, which is dealt with in this thematic section by Hinnebusch (2020), is the most prominent example. The increasing engagement of extra-regional actors beyond the USA is, however, just one side of the coin. The other is that, triggered by genuine regional dynamics related to the Arab Uprisings, regional actors, particularly from the Gulf, have stripped off their previous

caution in deploying and using their power capabilities in regional affairs.

In the debate on the Arab Uprisings, it has been emphasized that – with the exception of Bahrain – the uprisings have not posed a substantial threat to the monarchical regimes of the Gulf on the domestic level (Bank et al., 2014). Mass protests starting in December 2010 in fact endangered the stability of the republics only. On the one hand, monarchies could rely on sources of traditional legitimacy (Derichs and Demmelhuber, 2014), and where significant protests took place, security forces remained loyal (Barany, 2011). On the other hand, the oil-rich Gulf monarchies were better equipped to repel demands of regime change from below by providing additional fiscal provisions to their citizenry. They also offered symbolic and monetary support to those monarchical regimes which had less resources available (Hertog, 2011). It should not, however, be overlooked that the Arab Gulf states still perceived a major threat to their rules that stemmed from their regional image. After decades of decay, Egypt attempted to regain its role as the Middle Eastern centre of political gravitation with the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. This alerted the monarchies in the Gulf, as they had not forgotten that in the 1950s and 1960s revolutionary republics launched regional soft power policies that – much more than their hard power strategies – turned out to be a serious threat to monarchical legitimacy, especially in Saudi Arabia (Mann, 2012). The seriousness of this threat in recent history was partially a result of the then rather passive regional policies of the Arab Gulf States. Therefore, in order to prevent a *déjà-vu* experience, this time the Gulf States – beyond Saudi Arabia also the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar – launched active but ill-coordinated regional policies. Saudi Arabia in alliance with the UAE strongly engaged in the containment and overthrow of the government headed by the Muslim Brotherhood and the first democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, whereas Qatar supported them. Saudi Arabia and the UAE became highly engaged in all subregions and hotspots of the Arab Uprisings, namely in the Maghreb (particularly Libya), the Mashreq (beyond Egypt mainly in the Syrian uprisings and the subsequent civil war), and the Gulf region (mainly Yemen but to a certain degree also Iraq) (Aras and Falk, 2015; Sal-loukh, 2013).

Due to the unintended consequences of US warfare in the Middle East (Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003), Iran had already benefited from an increase in relative power capabilities in the early 2000s. Moreover, since 2011, Tehran has taken advantage of the Arab Uprisings to gain more influence in the Mashreq. Though Iran's strategy to draw a connecting line between the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Arab Uprisings failed right from the beginning, Tehran, heavily supported by its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, managed to get a foothold in Syria, thereby completing the so-called Shia corridor to the Mediterranean Sea (Wastnidge, 2017; Yaari, 2019).

The increased engagement of the Gulf States in regional and local affairs throughout the Middle East after 2011 and particularly the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran

for influence in the Mashreq has been strengthened by the end of the US hegemony in the Middle East. Yet, the causes stem from genuinely regional dynamics, as is discussed by several authors of this thematic section. Beck (2020) who deals with the currently three most powerful regional actors – Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia – argues that the Saudi–Iranian rivalry and its intriguing entanglement with the Israeli–Iranian contestation is the result of a reconfiguration of regional powers facilitated by the partial US retreat from the Middle East. Richter (2020) and Darwich (2020) painstakingly describe the role that regional actors have been playing independently of the USA. Hinnebusch (2020) shows the complex interplay between regional actors, particularly Iran, and extra-regional actors in the Syrian civil war, first and foremost Russia and potentially the European Union, when it comes to the challenge of reconstruction in Syria after the civil war has come to an end.

The Middle East in the 2010s: a highly contested multipolar system in flux

Even in the era of uncontested US hegemony, power was highly dispersed among several actors in the Middle East that have often been at odds with one another. Thus, with the wake-up of the Gulf States following the Arab Uprisings and the hegemonic era of the US coming to an end, an increasing number of regional and even some extra-regional actors with largely competing interests have been actively entering the stage of Middle Eastern politics. As a result, a highly contested and often spatially varying multipolar regional system in flux has been emerging.

Attempts have been made to frame the new regional system of the Middle East as it has emerged since the 2010s by highlighting one single dividing line. The most intriguing endeavour of this kind was pioneered by Valbjørn and Bank (2012) and more recently elaborated by Gause (2014). Based on the observation that what appears at first sight to be a Sunni–Shia rift in the Middle East of the early 21st century, Gause identifies a power-driven regional structure between Iran and Saudi Arabia that bears characteristics of the classical Arab Cold War as it emerged in the 1950s, with the main exception that Egypt and Saudi Arabia were then the major antagonists (Kerr, 1971). The endeavour of putting new wine into old bottles has turned out to be very productive, as it helped to overcome the limits of the popular paradigm of primordialism, according to which the Saudi–Iranian rivalry is the result of the Islamic schism between Sunni and Shia, the two most prominent sectarian groups in Islam. Yet, despite its theoretical elegance, there are also limits to the attempt of catching the regional system as it has been emerging in the 2010s by using one single line of division, for instance by highlighting the significance of power games.

An approach based on the idea of a Middle Eastern Cold War is ultimately bound to the limits of realism. However, as Beck (2020) shows by embarking on the productive tradition of theoretical pluralism in Middle Eastern Studies (Ryan, 2019), the dynamics of regional affairs following the Arab

Uprisings can hardly be understood without exceeding the limits of realism and therefore should take into account the insights derived from alternative schools of thought such as institutionalism, liberalism, and social constructivism. Initially, theoretical pluralism was no more than the eclectic application of diverse approaches. However, for some time a noteworthy number of studies on Middle Eastern international affairs have implemented a much better integrated and theoretically rigorous research agenda. Scholars have applied and tested theories of international relations to solve empirical puzzles looking at post-Arab Uprising events, which Valbjørn (2017) recently endorsed as a major desideratum of Middle East Studies. Current examples are Ahmadian and Mohsen's (2019) application of the logic of deterrence to Iran's policy towards Syria, Cannon and Donelli's (2019) work on the dynamics of Middle Eastern regional security complexes, Demmelhuber's (2019) use of the hedging concept to analyse recent foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, Mabon's (2019) contribution on (de-)sectarianization of Middle Eastern regional affairs, and Tsourapas' (2018) research on coercive migration diplomacy looking at Egypt, Jordan, and Libya.

This thematic section contributes to the tradition of theoretical pluralism. Its authors use different theoretical approaches and achieve added value by tying them in with the complex empirical realities of Middle Eastern regional affairs. Richter (2020) highlights the importance of a second image perspective by looking at substantial changes at the core of the domestic regime level in order to explain Saudi foreign policy changes. Darwich (2020) emphasizes the importance of status by looking at the specific status dynamics of emerging regional powers in order to unravel the escalation of commitment to a failed military intervention in Yemen. Hinnebusch (2020) takes his theoretical departure from realism but stretches out to crucial aspects of political economy and geo-economics with deeply entangled struggles between actors on the domestic, regional, and global level which eventually might lead to a frozen conflict in Syria with the potential of inadvertent future collisions. Yom (2020) adds to the debate on the US hegemonic decline, which is often traced back to military or economic weakness, with the deliberate US shift in great power positioning as an explanatory factor.

While it is the task of the contributions of this thematic section to fathom the utility of theoretical approaches in order to be able to better navigate through the complex multilevel disparity of contemporary Middle Eastern regional relations (Valbjørn, 2017), the remainder of this paper discusses three characteristic facets of the highly contested multipolar system in flux as it emerged in the 2010s: first, the securitization of political issues by prominent political leaders in the Middle East; second, the decline of regional institutions; and, third, the emergence of lasting war zones.

Securitization policies by political leaders

The first of the three factors to be discussed is a feature shared by the political leaders of the most powerful actors

in the regional power game: although US President Trump, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince and de facto leader Muhamad bin Salman, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei head very different kinds of political systems, they share an inclination to securitize political issues.

The diagnosis that the personalities of the four political leaders do matter is widespread. In the literature on the Middle East, it has also been convincingly argued that, due to the weakness of institutions, the characters of political leaders matter more than elsewhere, particularly than in the European context. Yet, when it comes to exceeding the limits of presenting these personalities as merely idiosyncratic phenomena by conceptualizing the commonalities of their political personalities in their relevance for Middle Eastern politics, the literature has so far not offered much more than labels based on catch-all categories such as the vaguely defined term 'populism'. Against this background, this paper argues that the four political leaders share a strong leaning towards securitization. Securitization policies are launched by speech acts that dramatize political issues and present them as matters of supreme priority or existential threats. Securitization policies are strategic and aim at legitimizing extra-ordinary measures that under regular conditions would not be justifiable. The targeted audiences of securitization policies are social and political groups and actors on the domestic and/or international level (Buzan et al., 1998; for an application to the Middle East, see: Beck, 2020; Calculli and Legrenzi, 2016).

The most spectacular securitization move in Trump's policies towards the Middle East occurred in a speech held on 8 May 2018, when he declared that the USA would withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly referred to as the Iran Nuclear Deal: Trump labelled the regime in Tehran as 'murderous' and argued that 'if we do nothing [...] the world's leading state sponsor of terror will be on the cusp of acquiring the world's most dangerous weapons' (Trump, 2018). The extra-ordinary measure that he attempted to justify by this securitization move was the violation of the international law's maxim that contracts must be kept (*pacta sunt servanda*). The purely instrumental aspect of Trump's securitization move becomes obvious in Yom's (2020) contribution: Trump overall shares the perspective of his predecessor Barack Obama that at present no actor in the Middle East poses a substantial, not to mention existential threat to the US homeland.

Saudi regional policies turned out to be much more proactive as a result of structural changes related to the Arab Uprisings. Yet, it was Muhammad bin Salman who systematically securitized the regime in Tehran by demonizing Khamenei, inter alia by stating that he 'makes Hitler look good' (Goldberg, 2018). As discussed by Darwich (2020), the Saudi Crown Prince thereby justified the extra-ordinary measure of extreme warfare in Yemen, which caused the most grave humanitarian catastrophe of the 2010s, by constantly referencing prevention of the Iranian encroachment in Yemen. In that context, Salman not only accused the Iranian regime of being 'based on pure ideology' and of protecting 'many of

the Al-Qaeda operatives', he also regularly made reference to Khamenei as the new Hitler of the Middle East (Salman, 2018).

Netanyahu frequently presents the regime in Tehran and its alliance with Hezbollah and Hamas as an existential threat to Israel. For instance, in March 2018 he told Russian President Vladimir Putin that Iran aims at implementing another holocaust (Winer, 2018). The main extra-ordinary measure Netanyahu attempts to legitimize by securitizing Iran is Israel's prolonged occupation of the Palestinian territories (Beck, 2016), as he made clear in an address to a February 2014 conference of Jewish organization presidents: 'how are we to be sure that areas that we cede to the Palestinians will not be taken over by Hamas and Hezbollah' (Netanyahu, 2014).

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic in Iran, its supreme leaders have securitized the existence of the state of Israel (Lupovici, 2019). Current Iranian leader Khamenei makes no exception: For instance, on 3 June 2018, he tweeted '#Israel is a malignant cancerous tumor in the West Asian region that has to be removed and eradicated' (Khamenei, 2018). Iran's securitization policies towards Israel are an attempt to justify what Hinnebusch (2020) describes as Tehran's high engagement in the Levant, which in the face of a severe economic crisis might have partly fuelled socio-political protests in Iran at the turn of the year 2017/18 (Fathollah-Nejad, 2018; for a different perspective see Azizi, 2018).

The decline of regional institutionalism

Another factor reinforcing the contested Middle Eastern multipolar system in flux relates to regional institutional linkages connecting actors within the region with one another. While overall bilateral linkages seem to have gained in importance, the quality of the existing regional institutional networks and organizations has been in additional decline since the beginning of the 2010s (Beck, 2015; Pinfari, 2016). Even before the Arab Uprisings, the Middle East was one of the most under-institutionalized world regions, and existing institutional structures largely failed to coordinate policies or mediate conflict (Isaac, 2015). There is no cross-regional organization in which all state actors are members. Three of the most powerful actors of the Middle East – Iran, Israel, and Turkey – are not represented within the few regional organizations that encompass the Middle East as a whole. The Arab League, still the Middle East's flagship of regional organizations, was rendered largely ineffective, as its members were stuck in the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. At the beginning of the 21st century, only the sub-regional Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in which all Gulf monarchies, but not the republican members of the Gulf subsystem Iraq, Iran, and Yemen, are members, was considered as comparatively effective (Pinfari, 2009).

In the wake of the Arab Uprisings, the Arab League and the GCC became a mere foreign policy tool of Saudi Arabia. Beck (2020) exemplifies this with the Arab League's condemnation of Iranian ally Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in March 2016, and Kneuer et al. (2019) show this using

the example of the GCC intervention in Bahrain in 2011. The GCC failed to play a mediating role in the severe conflict between its members Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain on the one hand and Qatar on the other, which culminated in the imposition of a fully-fledged embargo spearheaded by the former on the latter in 2017 (Neubauer, 2017). The weaknesses of the existing regional organizations are indirectly confirmed by Darwich (2020), Richter (2020), and Hinnebusch (2020), as they all find no evidence of their having any mediating or policy coordinating impact with regard to the ongoing violent conflicts in the Middle East.

The emergence of lasting war zones

As a result of three elements – the forceful regime responses in reaction to the mass uprisings since 2010, the part defection of security forces, and the interventions by external actors – devastating civil wars broke out in the Middle East after 2010. These wars created three new and lasting war zones in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. While in each case the specific pathway from authoritarian stability to civil war has varied, they all share the feature that protests that began peacefully escalated to forceful clashes between demonstrators and regime forces. The resulting war zones have been inflamed by intervening, rivalling regional actors (Lynch, 2016; Rosiny and Richter, 2016).

The long-term effects of the emergence of war zones across the Middle East are devastating. Apart from the tremendous increase in human suffering in all concerned countries, violent conflict has heavily undermined existing state efforts at human capital building and economic and infrastructure development. Additionally, war zones created permanent security threats for neighbouring countries and major global trade routes between East Asia and Europe.

Hinnebusch's (2020) contribution to the special section exemplifies the complexity of the emergence of war zones by analysing the Syrian case. He shows that the ongoing civil war in Syria replicates the contemporary struggle for power in the region by obstructing reconstruction of the country, thereby propping up an at least partially failed state. Darwich (2020) brings in the category of status as a formerly largely ignored dimension for the study of war initiation and escalation in the Middle East. She argues that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his Emirati counterpart Mohammed bin Zayed considered the Yemen war an opportunity to build their status as strong leaders, a perception they coveted at the regional and international level. As Darwich (2020) shows, the fear of status loss was a strong motivation for both leaders to continue and escalate their respective nations' warfare in Yemen. Richter (2020) points to the high potential for violent foreign policy action if a highly personalized political system disposes over enormous hydrocarbon wealth.

The way ahead for Middle East regional politics

The fluctuating regional post-Arab Uprising (dis-)order represents dynamics that link back to deep structural changes on

the global and the regional levels. These changes and dynamics will eventually shape future Middle Eastern regional politics. As it is unlikely that the Middle East will regain its role as a world region of primary importance for the USA in the future, other extra-regional actors will continue to experience more room for manoeuvre in the Middle East. Due to its limited capabilities and institutional deficits with regard to its foreign policy, the EU, whose primary concern towards the region is to seal off refugees, is hardly prepared to fill the gap left by the USA. Rather, Russia and China are likely aspirants for increasing engagement in the region. However, this will also raise expectations in the region that external actors fulfil certain tasks. For instance, as China will remain highly dependent on energy supplies from the Gulf, it is likely that this rising global power will play a bigger role, especially in the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, in the light of the decades-long painful experience of being subjected to US hegemony, Middle Eastern regional powers are unlikely to give up the room for manoeuvre gained in the 2010s.

Recent developments point to a decreased likelihood of an immediate war between Iran on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and/or Israel on the other. Assaults on the cargo ships in the Gulf of Oman and especially the attack on the Saudi oil production facilities in September 2019 reminded the Arab Gulf States of their vulnerabilities. Due to their fear of further escalation, for the time being, the GCC monarchies led by Saudi Arabia limit their escalating behaviour. The course of the 2019–20 Persian Gulf crisis has largely confirmed this analysis: Saudi Arabia refrained from escalating behaviour in the wake of the US assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, to which Iran responded with some self-restraint. However, the underlying causes of the conflicts are not solved. It is therefore only a matter of time before new contestations open up between some of the rivalling powers in the region.

In addition, securitization policies are likely to play a significant role in the Middle East in the future. Middle Eastern regimes are highly personalized and, especially in combination with rising social tensions due to declining hydrocarbon income since 2014, political leaders face few restrictions to unfolding their idiosyncrasies. Another reason is that Middle Eastern regional politics are still shaped by ideologically augmented conflicts. This applies to the quarrel on the authoritative interpretation of Islam(ism) that has deeply impacted Saudi–Iranian relations since the 1980s. Also, the widespread perception in the Israeli–Jewish and many Arab societies of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a matter of state identity is prone to lead to securitization policies.

There is no indication that the weakness of institutions in the Middle East will be overcome soon. On the contrary, the spatially varying multipolar regional system in flux as it has emerged in the 2010s will put additional pressure on the GCC and what else is left of regional institutional structures in the Middle East. Due to the weakness of regional institutions, it is likely that mediation and policy coordination will take place on an ad-hoc basis only in the future. Nevertheless, it should not be ruled out that the US retreat from the

Middle East would facilitate the institutionalisation of ad-hoc measures. For instance, actors of the Middle East could benefit from creating a genuine regional framework along the lines of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). However, as long as relations between major forces are shaped by deep mutual distrust and highly divergent interests, it is rather unlikely that ad-hoc measures will convert to lasting institutional structures – though those would be sorely needed in the violence-prone environment of the Middle East.

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