

# The Middle East

*This special Fokus series on the Strategic Review of Global Hotspots consists of seven parts and is based on the AIES online discussion on the same topic. The online lectures of the authors are available at: [aies.at/global-hotspots](https://aies.at/global-hotspots)*

When it comes to the situation in the Middle East every analyst is facing uncountable challenges because of lacking transparency and invisible networks. Therefore, it is necessary to define exactly what one is talking or writing about. The intention of this article is to identify relevant trends and developments in that war-torn region in order to gain a strategic overview. In this regard, five strategic trends in the Middle East will be discussed: 1) A new geopolitical orientation on the Arabian Peninsula; 2) A stronger Israel; 3) An anti-Iran coalition; 4) The failing 'Arabellion'; and 5) Turkish aspirations in the region.

## A new geopolitical orientation on the Arabian Peninsula

Shifting alliances on the Arabian Peninsula are changing the geopolitical orientations in the region. For instance, Qatar was in a diplomatic crisis with many other Arab countries since June 2017, but at the end of 2020, some bans and blockades imposed on Qatar were lifted and eased the crisis, in which the United States were supportive and inventive as well. What we are witnessing now, can be a game-changer.

More importantly, Israel is no longer enemy number one on the Arabian Peninsula. Israel is a strong player in the region as it is a modern state with a highly sophisticated industry and economy. On the other hand, the economies of several other Arab countries rely heavily on oil revenues, causing them to be financially fragile. As such, Israel is being reconsidered as a potential ally, in order to overcome economic transitions. Since more cooperation with Israel is likely to continue to unfold, geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East are evolving as well.

The Abraham Accords, signed by Bahrain, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US in summer 2020, launched a new era in MENA trade relations. The Abraham Accords can effectuate fundamental changes in bringing countries in the Middle East together and in establishing strong cooperation with Israel. For instance, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar may be in talks to join the Abraham Accords as well, while Egypt, Jordan, and Sudan already have normalised relations with Israel. The Arab countries that are increasingly engaging with Israel follow a simple formula: we cannot win against Israel, but we can win with Israel.

Instead of Israel, Iran is now being perceived as the largest security threat on the Arabian Peninsula. New arrangements in the region are focused on building up a strong alliance against Iran.

## Israel is stronger than ever before

Israel generally enjoys strong support from the US, but during the Trump Administration, it had an even greater support than before. The increased political engagement with Israel could be noticed in reality: the US acknowledged Jerusalem as capital of Israel in 2017 and ordered its Embassy to move there, the US recognised the Golan Heights as part of Israel in 2019, and the US 'accepted' Israeli settlements on the West Bank. Hence, some say the two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an illusion, as the West Bank is already in the hands of Israel, to a large extent. Furthermore, Palestine's leverage over US policy in the region has decreased.

Moreover, Israel is a modern country that can enable neighbouring Arab countries to make economic and political transitions. The economic and security cooperation with Israel yields new options for the whole region. Furthermore, the political images of some Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have been worsening. In this regard, a better relation with Israel could be beneficial to them as well. So, for some

Arab countries to be fit for future, they need Israel. Consequently, the Palestinian issue will not be the key point for the future.

Another power struggle is taking place in the Persian Gulf between the US and Iran, where Israel, as well as Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are allied with the US, while Syria, Iraq, and the Lebanese Hezbollah have strong relations with Iran.

## Iran's increasing and stable influence

The international community was hopeful about stabilising its relations with Iran in 2015, when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in Vienna. The intention was to bring Iran to the negotiating table in order to find a solution for Iran's nuclear aspirations and to prevent nuclear armament. Since Israel is widely presumed to possess nuclear weapons and has rivalry relations with Teheran, Iran's nuclear aspirations could provoke a nuclear arms race and an inflammable situation in the Middle East. Hence, US President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018 once again increased the concerns about nuclear escalation in the Middle East. After the US had withdrawn from the JCPOA, it adopted a strategy of exerting maximum pressure. However, this strategy has not yielded the results the US aspired. Firstly, there has been no regime change in Iran. In fact, one could argue the 'hardliners', who oppose Iran's engagement with the west, have only increased their influence over Iran's politics since. Secondly, Iran has remained a strong player and has kept its allies in the region. The country can still have significant political impact on Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen.

The isolation of Iran and the US' maximum pressure strategy have failed. The US assassination of Iranian top general Qasem Soleimani on 3 January 2020 could be understood as a provocation and a test of Iran's capabilities, but Iran's reaction to the assassination was largely rhetorical and

did not lead to further escalation. Furthermore, one should not forget that China, Russia, Turkey, and Qatar maintained their relations with Iran. Iran's aforementioned ties with Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon are also still in place.

Thus, a reorientation to regard Iran as a strong actor in the region was necessary. The questions for the future are whether Iran can be brought back to the negotiating table, whether the JCPOA can be reinstated, or whether there will be more escalation.

### Ten years of 'Arabellion'

We will look at the situation in the MENA region, ten years after the start of 'Arabellion' (the term 'Arab Spring' is misleading). There are still demonstrations in Tunisia, the country of which we had the most hope to overcome its issues. Besides, there have been regime changes in Libya and Egypt. Meanwhile, there is a civil war in Syria and Lebanon is totally shaken up. Iraq is on a good track, to a certain extent, but whether it can make the transition to a more inclusive government is yet to be seen and depends on other actors, such as Iran.

In this context, a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), assessing the situation in the MENA region, said: "The results are not good. Far too many countries have become 'failed states' in ways that go beyond the threat posed by Iran, extremism, and ethnic and sectarian divisions. They have failed to make adequate progress in civil and economic reforms, and they have stopped short of reducing corruption and incompetence in national politics and governance."

The revolutions' lack of success in the MENA region could be ascribed to the revolutions' lack of organised structures and set goals. We do not know what the impact will be in the next years, because we know from experience that revolutions like the ones we witnessed here take time: 25 years on average. So, the 'Arabellion' is not over yet. Only 50 percent of revolutions are

successful – those are the empirical results from many cases that were studied after 1945.

Syria is still a hotspot, although it is not comparable to what we experienced in 2017 and 2018. There is still a concentration of jihadist fighters in the Idlib region in northwestern Syria. Along Syria's northern border, Turkey has a strong influence. Those issues will be on the table the next couple of years.

Another point that has to be mentioned in this context is Daesh. Daesh' strategy currently looks like this:

- ★ Survival: the caliphate was destroyed, but not Daesh as a whole and its ideology;
- ★ Expansion: although Daesh lost large parts of its territories in Iraq and Syria, its remnants are still active in many countries, providing a source for future expansion;
- ★ Demonstration of power: Daesh aims to show that it is still alive. A single attack, like the one in Austria on 2 November 2020, allows them to show that their spirit is alive;
- ★ Inspiration: meanwhile, Daesh will continue to aim to inspire others, and the Covid-19 pandemic increases 'opportunities' for online radicalisation.
- ★ Patience: Daesh is waiting to see what the political developments are in the region and is waiting for its chance to act again, like they did from 2015 onwards.

### Turkey's aspirations in the region

Back in 2011, many policymakers, analysts, and scholars were talking about the 'Turkish model'. Some were hoping it could be a model for MENA countries that were facing turmoil, because Turkey had a strong political role for Islam, but also a strong political model based on secularism. It was also the time of Turkey's foreign policy concept of 'zero problems'. Turkey was very proud to announce that it had stable relationships with countries in its neighbouring regions.

Today, this has changed significantly: Turkey has regional power aspirations. For instance, it is seeking new energy sources in the Eastern Mediterranean and its foreign policy is militarising. Turkey's search for natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean is causing problems not only with Cyprus and Greece, but also within NATO and the EU. Meanwhile, Turkey is showing the cold shoulder to Europe and the West and is providing demonstrative support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Besides, it maintains strong relations with Qatar and it is involved in Libya. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recently indicated that Turkey will continue to stay in Libya, despite calls from the international community to withdraw. Although Turkey should not be underestimated when looking at the MENA region, its economic situation is fragile, which could eventually have an impact on its foreign policy. Besides, if there is a strong alliance of Arab states, it can turn on Turkey as well.

Additionally, the economic, political, and military relations between Turkey and Russia have huge political implications. For NATO, this raises the question whether it can rely on Turkey at its southern flank, when it has such a strong relationship with Russia.

### Outlook

Many European governments were hoping for US President Biden to win the US elections in November 2020 and are expecting the new US Administration to be part of the solutions to different political disputes across the world. Whether the US will be, however, is doubtful, because Biden has many economic and societal issues to face domestically. Besides, the Middle East is important to the US, but Biden will have to focus on Asia and China in particular. A question for Biden is whether the Abraham Accords will survive and whether it will have a positive impact on Saudi Arabia, since it is an important strategic ally of the US. Nevertheless, Biden's next steps regarding the Middle East will most likely be informative, not decisive.

At the same time, Russia will not give up its positions in Syria and Libya. Russia has effectively identified and filled vacuums in the region over the last ten years. As opposed to Turkey, Russia has a more 'silent' approach. What Turkey and Russia do have in common is that their foreign actions can serve as a tool for improving their image at home, aiming to appear successful and strong. Nevertheless, Russia might have more to offer than Turkey in the region, such as military technology.

How the following issues regarding the future of the Middle East will evolve remains to be seen: a) whether the Gulf countries will engage in strong relations with Israel; b) what the international community can offer Iran to bring its nuclear programme under control again in a peaceful way; c) how the 2021 Palestinian legislative, presidential and National Council elections – to be held in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza – will turn out; and d) whether Turkey can maintain its strong game.

Finally, the first of the two biggest questions is whether it will come to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. This depends highly on Iran's actions and engagement with the international community. The second one is whether the two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a future. On the ground, there seems to be less confidence in it than before.

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#### Endnotes

\* Cordesman Anthony, 2020, "The Greater Middle East: From the "Arab Spring" to the "Axis of Failed States", Centre for Strategic & International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/greater-middle-east-arab-spring-axis-failed-states>

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Layout: Medienbüro Meyer