

MIDDLE EAST DIALOGUE

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ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

The Middle East Institute (MEI) is a center of knowledge dedicated to narrowing divides between the peoples of the Middle East and the United States. With over 70 years' experience, MEI has established itself as a credible, non-partisan source of insight and policy analysis on all matters concerning the Middle East. MEI is distinguished by its holistic approach to the region and its deep understanding of the Middle East's political, economic and cultural contexts. Through the collaborative work of its three centers – Policy & Research, Arts & Culture, and Education – MEI provides current and future leaders with the resources necessary to build a future of mutual understanding.

Cover photo: An aerial view of the city during the Eid al-Adha in Istanbul, Turkey on July 11, 2022. [Photo by Muhammed Enes Yildirim/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.](#)

Executive Summary

- The Ukraine war has impacted MENA directly as global economic shocks have affected much of the region.
- While the effects of the war are being felt most prominently through economic challenges and the food security crisis, the hardening of global geopolitical fault lines — namely between the West and Russia — has given the region pause as it attempts to carefully balance relationships with both sides.
- Traditional alignment with Washington is no longer the de facto policy position of MENA countries, as a decade-long U.S. retreat has combined with a drive for regional diversification in relationships with global powers such as Russia and China.
- Consensus is growing among countries in the region that de-escalation of conflict drivers and rapprochement must be part of the new regional security architecture, including between the Gulf states and Iran.
- This has led to a wider shift in geopolitical trends in the MENA region, notably among Arab countries, as the Gulf leads a broad détente with non-Arab neighbors such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey.
- Participants view political realignment positively, but note the challenges ahead include the risk of conflict (or confrontation) in sensitive areas such as Syria and Iraq.
- However, the priority focus on current challenges remains the economic, energy, and climate agendas, with the MENA region expected to face continuing shocks.
- An enduring economic crisis, compounded by a looming food crisis, will demand support from petrostates in the region; however, that support is unlikely to be on the same scale as in the past.
- Meanwhile, the JCPOA talks have stagnated and there are clear markers of continued political paralysis from both the U.S. and Iran that are likely to prevent a formal agreement from being signed in the near future.
- Despite this, the Gulf countries remain committed to the ongoing talks with Iran. They are unlikely to be deterred in the event of a U.S. return to a policy of “maximum pressure.”
- Although there are many external issues that impress upon the region, there remain areas of competition, confrontation, and cooperation that are unlikely to be significantly impacted either by the JCPOA or the Ukraine war. These include tensions in the eastern Mediterranean region, instability in North Africa (and Sudan), and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the continuing domestic challenges plaguing regimes in the region since the Arab Spring began.

Middle East Dialogue

During two days of meetings, members of the Middle East Dialogue, convened by the Middle East Institute (MEI), met in Istanbul, Turkey to discuss pressing issues relating to: i) the effects of the war in Ukraine on the MENA region; ii) current and future projections regarding Gulf relations with Iran, amid the stalemate over a revival of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed between Iran and the P5+1; iii) the future pathways and security framework for the MENA region; and iv) the Baghdad Declaration of Good Neighborhood Principles for the Middle East, first published in December 2017 as one outcome of this series of MEI-convened meetings. This meeting brought together regional policymakers, academics, and experts from across the MENA region, including the Gulf states, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. This report provides an analytical understanding of the issues discussed and recommendations shared during the meeting.

The Middle East Dialogue is a process that began in 2012, following the Arab uprisings and the outbreak of war in Syria. Noting how the regional political landscape has been upended by the events of the last decade, the Dialogue was created to provide space for experts, officials (former and current), and emerging changemakers to convene and discuss priority areas related to security, political dynamics, and the changing regional order. Over the years, different Dialogue participants have convened to map out and better analyze the region, seeking solutions and recommendations on the evolving regional order and conflict de-escalation. The Middle East Dialogue now runs parallel to two separate Dialogues that convene stakeholders with material investment and involvement in the region, namely the United States, Russia, and Turkey, in separate spaces. These concurrent Dialogues seek to inform each other, provide ongoing learning and knowledge sharing, and feed into a holistic analytical understanding of the trajectory of the MENA region.

Recent Developments, Impact of the Ukraine War

- U.S. positions and priorities are shifting as the war has exposed sensitivities with regional allies and partners
- Energy and food security are central to the impact felt by the region. The war has highlighted the region's strategic significance for global energy security once more, even as

the looming food security crisis could cripple many parts of MENA

- Threat perceptions are changing as Russia's attention is diverted away from the region. In the face of a Russian retreat, the resulting security vacuums could reignite violence, potentially in Syria and Iraq

Much of the focus on the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine centers on the global economic shocks and how they affect the region, which is both home to the world's largest fossil fuel providers and heavily reliant on basic food commodities from Ukraine and Russia (see below). In addition, the broader relationship between MENA states and Russia has been brought into question by the West, primarily the United States. The war has impacted energy flows (elevating once more the Middle East's importance as an energy provider), post-COVID economic recovery plans, and climate change reforms and emissions reduction targets that have been committed to on a global scale through the United Nations Conference of the Parties process since the 2015 Paris Declaration. In addition, although Russian forces have not withdrawn from Syria and Libya, the Ukraine war has nevertheless laid bare the security vulnerabilities of its aligned proxy actors. Concerns over a potential future withdrawal of Russian forces from some regional conflict zones have raised the threat perceptions among regional actors over a possible renewed escalation of violence in currently frozen conflict landscapes.

“As conflict geopolitics move away from the Middle East and refocus on Europe, there is broad consensus that the region must act now to help itself and reformulate its own security architecture.”

While MENA countries contend that they are rightly acting in their own interests by not aligning with one side or the other in the war in Ukraine, it has created tensions between the U.S. and its regional allies. Meanwhile, Turkey finds itself caught up in the many roles it plays in regional and European security as a NATO partner, a candidate for membership in the European Union, and a relative regulator of the Black Sea — a strategic lifeline for Russian access to warm water ports and vital for

Southeastern European trade and exports. Finally, from Iran's perspective, the war has forced a reckoning over Russia's geopolitical role, exposed the weakness of its military power, and ushered in a return to Cold War paradigms that will affect Tehran's perception of Russia's role in the Syrian conflict. Tehran perceives mistrust to be growing across the region in light of the Ukraine war, and the resulting political opportunities — if not economic or security ones — are assessed to be potent.

“The most pressing issues that will determine both how big the economic shock to the region is and how long it will last will be determined primarily by the duration of the Ukraine war and the sanctions imposed on Russia.”

While the dynamics of the Ukraine war continue to fluctuate, regional participants still debate whether international confidence in the ability to beat back Russia is rightly placed. Furthermore, with sanctions against Moscow set to remain in place for the long term — a de facto “maximum pressure” campaign against the Russian Federation imposed by Washington and Brussels — the region is contending with having to adjust to new realities alone.

Normalization processes with Israel remain in flux and at different stages. As the crisis within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) subsides and the Abraham Accords become part of the regional fabric, the adjustment of relationships is ongoing and will form the backbone of how the region responds to the multitude of shocks created by the Ukraine war. These processes may, on the surface, reduce the disquiet over threats of a regional arms race. Regime survival across MENA remains both a national priority for each country, and as alliances are being redrawn and re-enforced, a regional priority.

Finally, both the perception of Israel in the region and its relationship with the U.S. are coming under increased scrutiny as the Ukraine war develops. The treatment of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories remains a wider regional affront and parallels are increasingly being drawn over the stark differences

with the West's policy toward Ukraine. Regular and repeated questioning of how the U.S. chooses to defend Ukraine for the same reasons it supports Israel is increasing the base of anti-American sentiment that is taking hold once more across the MENA region. The recent killing of Al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by Israeli security forces is adding to new forms of civic activism and solidarity with Palestinians. This is likely, in the longer term, to affect not only the normalization processes that are ongoing with Israel, but also the possibility of future normalization agreements with other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, as well as the wider U.S.-MENA relationships. While Europe has been able to avail itself of similar, direct comparisons and criticisms, the West's treatment of Ukrainian refugees, compared to its behavior toward Syrian and Iraqi refugees in 2014/15, has fueled both ambivalence toward Russia and created its own form of disquiet over Europe's relationships in the region.

“Ten of the 17 most water-distressed countries in the world are in the MENA region ... even while agriculture remains the primary source of revenue and income for many middle-income countries. Economic and energy diversification will become key for the region, both as water supply declines and temperatures increase, requiring diversion of state funds and aid budgets to respond to damage caused by climate change.”

For the first time in almost two decades the region's political, security, and economic trajectory is being impacted by a conflict outside of its geographic territory. As conflict geopolitics move away from the Middle East and refocus on Europe, there is broad consensus that the region must act now to help itself and reformulate its own security architecture. Even as the war has had an initial positive economic impact on regional oil and gas producers, as higher oil and gas prices have boosted export revenues, the longer-term impact will require the region's richest

and most powerful countries to work together to support middle-income countries that risk collapse. The wider global economic impact will further fuel rapprochement efforts, particularly if (or when) global energy demand peaks owing to soaring prices and begins to affect both energy supply and demand.

As Russia is increasingly occupied by the Ukraine conflict theater and the JCPOA talks are stalemated, greater direct confrontation between Israel and Iran inside Syria and Iraq could escalate violence and threaten a renewed proxy conflict. While there is a reduced focus on North Africa, a similar threat perception exists in Libya, as proxy actors have materially influenced European involvement and support. Turkey's attention may be diverted toward the Black Sea and its role in NATO for the time being, but Ankara's longer-term objectives along its borders with Iraq and Syria and in the Eastern Mediterranean continue to prevent frozen conflicts there from developing into stable ceasefires or enduring peace. Even as the Ukraine war has accelerated regional cooperation, at least for now, conflict drivers remain potent and active and continue to stir up instability under the surface. While the war prolongs, the threat perception among some participants in the region remains elevated for the long term.

Economics: Socio-economic Indicators for the Region

Non-oil and gas producing countries in the region are already being heavily impacted by the war in Ukraine, and the recent global downturn and prospective economic recession have forced a reckoning for international financial institutions (IFIs) and their support to regional economies. In this context, Egypt provides perhaps the clearest example of the different impacts that will be seen across the rest of the region. With its massive reliance on both Russia and Ukraine for wheat — the two countries account for more than 60% of its annual supply — food security remains the highest priority; however, the longer-term impact on an array of other markets, including oil and gas and fertilizer, has sent prices and inflation soaring.

Many countries across the region had barely begun to recover from the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic before they were hit by the shock of the Ukraine war. While much of the region was seemingly recovering in relatively good form from the pandemic, the war has affected everything

from trading routes and exports to tourism and broader macroeconomic indicators across much of the Middle East. In addition to the post-pandemic recovery and the Ukraine war, both the longevity of the current China lockdown and its return to the market once the country (and much of Asia) reopens is putting additional strain on the global economy. This has increased the demand for external funding across the region, and IFIs are largely expecting Gulf countries to help support stabilization efforts. This, therefore, now requires a different set of principles and investment flows within the region.

“Part of the economic overhaul will require significant expansion of renewable energy as a primary energy source for the region. While countries like Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia are moving toward the use of renewables and carrying out a transition that, it is believed, cannot be walked back at this stage, much of the region lags far behind — despite having similar resources upon which comparable policies can be developed.”

Even so, projections suggest a global windfall from the rise in oil and gas prices of some \$400 billion (gross) for those regional energy exporters. This would help to significantly replenish coffers in the Gulf countries, Iraq, and Algeria and come amid a rebounding of growth within those markets that has further supported pandemic recovery. This massive influx of revenues has, however, raised questions about whether the positive economic steps taken before and during the pandemic will endure (e.g., the expansion of policies around new taxes in Saudi Arabia and the UAE), or whether these countries will roll back commitments to economic reform in light of stressed budgets as inflation rises.

The most pressing issues that will determine both how big the economic shock to the region is and how long it will last will be determined primarily by the duration of the Ukraine war and the sanctions imposed on Russia. As the war prolongs,

both oil and non-oil exporting countries will be increasingly negatively affected, especially if countries are forced to adjust to yet another “new normal” that sees a reduction in Russia’s role as a commodities player in global markets alongside a ban on exports from Ukraine (now growing to encompass wheat export bans in other parts of Eastern Europe and India). Such an impact would be compounded by the already shifting reliance on fossil fuels as climate concerns prevail over energy demand — a direct consequence of the pandemic and subsequent recovery. In addition to the war, the duration of the China lockdown, which is contributing to the downturn in the global economy, is set to directly impact oil producers as energy demand plateaus outside of Asia.

“As China becomes the main customer for regional energy exports and a growing partner in digital and material infrastructure, it seems unlikely that there will be a return to historical U.S.-MENA ties: ‘The U.S. needs regimes of the region, but this is not the 80s and it’s not about certain leaders. It is purely for geostrategic reasons, no longer personal relationships.’”

Even as the focus on the region is divided between oil and gas producers and non-producers, all countries across MENA are facing climate emergencies, the most recent example of which was the series of dust storms that have enveloped Iraq and parts of the Gulf. Furthermore, the increasing unsustainability of local water-intensive agriculture production in recent years has placed more pressure on food imports from the rest of the world. The model that has been in place for decades is growing more and more unsustainable in the new global context. The most populous countries, such as Egypt and Pakistan, have been the most immediately impacted by the war as their wheat supplies dwindle; however, severe drought has made Yemen the most food insecure country in the region, and Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Morocco all face major food security concerns.

The international community is aware of the threats facing the MENA region, and Europe is mobilizing both to diversify its energy supplies away from Russia and to bring together global powers to provide food security funding and assistance to ensure the most vulnerable countries — in the MENA region and across Africa — can stave off a crisis that risks catastrophic levels of starvation. While the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) spring meetings saw no consensus between global powers, the World Bank, and the IMF on how to tackle the growing international debt crisis, there is a consensus on working with more affluent regional countries to help support poor and middle-income countries in the Global South. This indirectly increases reliance on the Gulf states to support measures that will keep the economies of other struggling countries in the neighborhood afloat.

However, even as the IMF turns to Gulf countries to support the region financially, there appears to be some pause in Gulf capitals about doing so. Despite having pledged over \$20 billion in support to Egypt, for example, Gulf countries seem much warier of the risks of simply “throwing money” at the country, in a repeat of the \$35 billion bailout in 2013 financed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait following the military ouster of former President Mohamed Morsi and his replacement by President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi. Instead, there are growing calls for more regional cooperation and coordination of financial structures, cross-border trade, and investment to support the harnessing of private funding, albeit with Gulf investors facing accusations of crowding out private capital in the respective countries.

“The U.S.de-prioritization — a decade in the making — of the MENA region has collided with a new regional alignment that is driving a diversification in relationships within the region and beyond.”

The coming debate, therefore, will likely not be about if Gulf countries invest in their neighbors, but how. Traditionally, most of the middle-income countries have had agri-heavy economies,

driven by their agricultural trade. But as climate shocks increase and the region heats up at twice the rate of the rest of the world, the “new normal” should seek to use this moment to overhaul and revamp economies. A movement from agri-based economies toward high-tech development, mirroring some of the more trade-heavy, resource-light models, may make for improved longer-term structural reforms that can stabilize the MENA region in a broader economic sense.

“Part of the region’s calculations with the Ukraine war, its relationship with Russia, and regional rapprochement is a hedging process against the current U.S. administration and a wider expectation that the Democratic Party will lose power, starting with the midterm elections in November 2022 and followed by the presidential elections in 2024.”

Nevertheless, aid flows from Gulf countries now not only seek to avoid merely propping up regional allies financially, but are increasingly built upon a political and geopolitical aid distribution that supports the furthering of policy objectives — both in the region and globally. Aid has been more recently viewed as a state-supporting tool to bolster friendly regimes, e.g., the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s support to Egypt (post-2013) and Pakistan, as political and geopolitical motivations drive the provision of assistance. This is also notably apparent in humanitarian structures and support. Despite being an integral part of the war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia remained the largest donor to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) fund for Yemen for several years. Importantly, despite the focus on the aid mechanisms deployed by Gulf partners, studies show that current aid levels are dwarfed (accounting for inflation) by aid disbursed by Gulf countries to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, and the largest current recipients of Gulf aid remain Egypt, Pakistan, and Iraq.

A new form of emerging financial aid and support is now seen in the investment tools used by private developers and investors from Gulf countries that seek to either expand their own operations into populous nations like Egypt and Pakistan, or acquire parts of successful sectors in these economies. Gulf economic expansion into the wider MENA region has increased rapidly in the last decade, especially in real estate and banking. It has been a major driver of macroeconomic indicators and responsible for a significant share of foreign direct investment (FDI), even as FDI from outside the region declines.

However, despite positive indicators toward investment and receptive actors in the Gulf that are seemingly ready to support their neighbors, the region continues to face a climate emergency. This crisis is only worsening and will — in the near term — greatly affect regional economies, requiring the development of diversification plans to ensure structural reforms can be enacted to stabilize countries and ensure their longer-term viability. Ten of the 17 most water-distressed countries in the world are in the MENA region, with Yemen the most water-distressed in the world, even while agriculture remains the primary source of revenue and income for many middle-income countries in the region. Economic and energy diversification will become key for the region, both as water supply declines and temperatures increase, requiring diversion of state funds and aid budgets to respond to damage caused by climate change (e.g., increased flooding, drought mechanisms and water shortages, adverse weather events, and increased energy consumption to counter rising temperatures).

Part of the economic overhaul will require significant expansion of renewable energy as a primary energy source for the region. While countries like Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia are moving toward the use of renewables and carrying out a transition that, it is believed, cannot be walked back at this stage, much of the region lags far behind — despite having similar resources upon which comparable policies can be developed.

Political Dynamics in the GCC-Iran and U.S.-Iran Conflict Spaces

- The JCPOA negotiations have become stalemated, and the absence of a deal makes the region more vulnerable and

increases the threat perceptions of direct Israel-Iran confrontation in Syria, Iraq, and potentially, Lebanon

- Tehran is more concerned with assurances and guarantees related to the JCPOA terms, than the ensuing debate over IRGC listing (FTO)
- Regional normalization and outreach (Turkey-GCC, Iran-GCC, Turkey-Egypt) continues and is unlikely to be deterred either by a collapse of JCPOA negotiations or the possibility of future U.S. threats to disengage with Iran

Despite crises and impacts of the war that will be felt across MENA to varying degrees, there are clear economic policies that are guiding both the political and security realignment underway in the region. As the ongoing normalization processes are debated, the broader and unifying regional concept is one of an emerging and future China that can and will continue to absorb most of the region's energy supply. As China becomes the main customer for regional energy exports and a growing partner in digital and material infrastructure, it seems unlikely that there will be a return to historical U.S.-MENA ties: *"The U.S. needs regimes of the region, but this is not the 80s and it's not about certain leaders. It is purely for geostrategic reasons, no longer personal relationships."*

"Gulf countries have seemingly moved away from a regime-change position in Iran; instead, they are now trying to find a solution to their long-standing problems with Tehran and be their own architects of regional peace-making."

As a result, the U.S. de-prioritization — a decade in the making — of the MENA region has collided with a new regional alignment that is driving a diversification in relationships within the region and beyond. Leading this charge is the UAE, which has built on its 2020 Abraham Accords agreement with Israel by not only expanding its partnership with Tel Aviv, but also seeking rapprochement with Turkey and taking part in parallel diplomacy with Iran. This comes as Saudi Arabia expands its own talks with Iran and suspends its activity in Yemen to try to bring the war there to an end. Meanwhile, it has led a realignment of GCC actors, ending the Gulf crisis

with Qatar in 2021 with the al-Ula Agreement. As such, a prospective Biden tour of the region may be seen as positive for furthering U.S. interests, but regional actors remain unconvinced that it is in the region's best interests to realign themselves outrightly, or solely, with Washington.

"Gulf countries appear firm in their independent push for a détente with Tehran and among themselves are ready to commit to such a course, even if the U.S. position shifts and reverts to a 'maximum pressure' campaign."

While the GCC realignment appears to be determining the regional trajectory, there is an underlying driver of the JCPOA and Iran's wider regional activity outside of its nuclear capabilities. Owing to political pressure in Washington, the final arrangements of the draft nuclear deal have been rendered too toxic for President Biden to lobby for, in particular the question of de-listing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the foreign terrorist organization (FTO) list and the requirement that Biden provide guarantees to Congress that the IRGC is not involved in terrorist activity. With a growing number of Democrats now publicly demonizing these Iranian demands, efforts to revive the JCPOA face political paralysis.

Part of the region's calculations with the Ukraine war, its relationship with Russia, and regional rapprochement is a hedging process against the current U.S. administration and a wider expectation that the Democratic Party will lose power, starting with the midterm elections in November 2022 and followed by the presidential elections in 2024. Regional actors contend that the Ukraine war will not end soon and is likely to continue to dominate regional and geopolitical dynamics for the medium term, if not have a long-term impact on geopolitical trends. Gulf countries have seemingly moved away from a regime-change position in Iran; instead, they are now trying to find a solution to their long-standing problems with Tehran and be their own architects of regional peace-making. Even as the U.S. encourages such moves, and contends that the nuclear arrangement was merely an

arms-control treaty that wouldn't address aspects of Iran's regional behavior outside of the deal, there remains lingering resentment and a sense of abandonment in Gulf capitals. As such, Gulf countries appear firm in their independent push for a détente with Tehran and among themselves are ready to commit to such a course, even if the U.S. position shifts and reverts to a "maximum pressure" campaign. Should the JCPOA officially collapse and stringent sanctions be re-imposed on Iran, it is deemed unlikely that Gulf leaders would comply with U.S. requests to halt their talks with the Islamic Republic.

For Iran, talks in Vienna appear permanently stalled, although it is argued from within the negotiations team that it has never been about the issue of the IRGC's FTO delisting but rather assurances and guarantees they demand from the Biden administration that are not forthcoming. In addition, while talks with Gulf states have focused on the activity of Iranian proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah, Tehran feels less confident of what Gulf countries would offer in return for a shift in Iran's regional security posture.

Among actors close to the Vienna talks there is a sense that a permanent freezing of the current situation is both the most likely outcome and the most positive one at this time. In the absence of a signed agreement, both countries would continue to adhere to certain parts of it, with the U.S. allowing Iran to sell more oil for the time being, while Iran deescalates its enrichment program. While this would appear on the face of it to satisfy both parties, and possibly even quieten the discontent coming from Iran's Gulf neighbors, there are nevertheless significant security threats that could escalate, namely the Israeli perception of and response to such a "freeze."

There is a broad consensus that while the region is cooperating and seeking de-escalation, conflict drivers are ripe and rife across parts of the region, some of which remain inherently independent of the JCPOA talks and any détente between the Gulf and Iran. Primarily, the ongoing escalation in Syria and Iraq between Iran and Israel risks a direct confrontation that could drag the region into conflict once more. Further afield, the Palestinian issue continues to generate significant anger and provoke condemnation from Arab populations, creating discomfort for regional leaders allied with Israel. And finally, with regional competition as potent a driver as the need for cooperation, Sudan's fragile transition is further threatened by the opportunity it presents not only for Gulf food security,

but also maritime control of the Red Sea corridor that pits the leaders of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar against each other to a certain degree.

“For regional actors such as Turkey, Egypt, and Israel, the Eastern Mediterranean is the most potent flashpoint in the region, even if it also presents significant opportunities for cooperation.”

For regional actors such as Turkey, Egypt, and Israel, the Eastern Mediterranean is the most potent flashpoint in the region, even if it also presents significant opportunities for cooperation. With competition to support Europe's diversification away from Russian fossil fuels, the Egypt/Israel energy partnership is both a direct rival of Turkey and contributes to wider geopolitical dynamics and tensions in the region that have ensnared Europe in the longstanding Greece-Turkey conflict, Libya and its current frozen conflict, and the Suez Canal corridor — the world's most important maritime thoroughfare for global trade. The Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement has been haphazard at best and has significantly cooled off in the last 12 months, even as Ankara continues to make positive overtures to Cairo, encouraging talks between the two. Meanwhile, Europe has a delicate balance to strike as it seeks a partnership with Israel and Egypt, while concurrently relying heavily on Turkey as an active NATO partner to secure the Black Sea — a pivotal factor in the international community's support for Ukraine.

Future Pathways and Regional Security Scenarios

Based upon a group discussion of a recent AUC study and report: [*AUC Centennial Project AlMostaqbal: Envisioning a Better Arab Future.*](#)

Over the last 20 years the region has been shaped by three major events that have defined its internal and external policies and partnerships: i) the 9/11 attacks on the United States, ii) the Iraq War, and iii) the 2010-11 Arab Spring.

Based on a desire to critically assess the region's ability to respond to these shocks and events, as well as the needs of citizens, this new report, based on research conducted during 2020-21 under the auspices of the American University in Cairo (AUC), looks at what kind of future the region can seek to achieve.

The report has sparked significant debate across the region, not only in response to its findings but also its parameters and methodology. From the outset, with a focus on Arab perspectives and policies in the region, it was felt by participants to have failed to grasp the wider region and the influence and role of other regional powers, such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey. The report does emphasize, however, that it was prepared “by Arabs, for Arabs,” and is clear that that any sustainable regional security architecture needs to incorporate non-Arab regional players.

“While the security agenda has driven a series of rapprochement efforts across the region, led by the Gulf countries, there remain significant gaps and possible security breaches. There are notable inflection points, such as the failure of talks to revive the 2015 JCPOA, that will determine the nature of the security threats, although the Gulf states have made a clear commitment to stay the course and continue talks with Iran on rapprochement.”

In addition, it is believed to be too difficult now to “box” 22 countries in the MENA region into one space or place them under a single umbrella. With very distinct Gulf, Levant, and North Africa regions as part of the wider Middle East — alongside the non-Arab countries — there are arguably now separate centers of power and very different perspectives, not only on future pathways, but also on priorities and policies for the wider region.

Nevertheless, while the region is still reeling from significant foreign intervention, the Arab Spring revealed substantial state weakness and an inability to meet the social and economic aspirations. Those challenges have spread and remain unanswered; they are potent across the entire region, even among the petrostates of the Gulf, despite attempts to broadly modernize society and diversify economies to provide more opportunity for a burgeoning young population. In addition, having not satisfied the initial demands of the Arab Spring in 2011, resulting in the further eruptions seen in 2019, the entire MENA region now faces the compounding challenges of climate change and resource scarcity.

When viewed in a historical context it is important to remember that similar risks and recommendations have been a formal part of regional analysis since the landmark 2000 UNDP Arab Human Development Report. A number of the internal risks and threats raised in the 2000 report remain potent drivers of instability 20 years later and many of the recommendations are similar too, rooted in the need for social overhaul and to address the challenges that both led to the Arab Spring and drive much of the younger population's aspirations.

Regional actors still firmly contend that without political settlements that center justice, accountability, and the dignity of individuals, the region cannot achieve stability. At the core of this issue remains the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. While the report affirms the two-state solution as the recommended policy to commit to, regional actors are split on their approach to the conflict. For those for whom the reality on the ground has made a two-state solution implausible, civil society efforts have revisited a focus on rights and responses to Israeli security measures, rather than the question of “land for peace” as formulated in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. However, for others, in particular Jordanians, the abandonment of the two-state solution is perceived to be a direct security threat. With the common trope of “Jordan is Palestine” — regularly voiced by the Israeli right-wing camp — abandoning the two-state solution is viewed in Jordan as abandoning the entirety of Palestine and Jordan, succumbing to right-wing Israeli rhetoric to displace all Palestinians into Jordan and allow the annexation of the whole West Bank.

Conclusion

The region's future is clearly uncertain and the factors that will shape its trajectory have yet to be determined. Even as the region faces continuous economic shocks, an ongoing climate emergency, and heightened threat perceptions and security concerns, there remains significant optimism about the opportunities that it can harness.

On the economic agenda, regional cooperation, driven by support for diversification and efforts to use this moment to instigate a material overhaul of old, abused economic systems, is needed to respond to long-term shocks and diminishing resources. However, in the immediate to near term, the region faces an economic shock that could reverberate for many years and significantly change the regional landscape. The climate emergency comes at a time when there is a global food crisis, with MENA already the world's most water insecure region and one of its most food insecure regions as well. While there were similar drivers of what became the Arab Spring in 2011 through the years of 2007-10, the current situation is deemed to be significantly worse as a result of the compounded post-COVID and Ukraine war shocks that the world is attempting to absorb today.

“The most prominent signs of both the generational split and renewed forms of activism growing outside of state control are the reinvigoration of both the Palestinian cause and the fight for self-determination. New forms of civic engagement and activism are working outside state lines and far removed from the institutional barriers of the peace process — be it Oslo, the U.N. Quartet, or regional regimes.”

While the security agenda has driven a series of rapprochement efforts across the region, led by the Gulf countries, there remain significant gaps and possible security breaches. There

are notable inflection points, such as the failure of talks to revive the 2015 JCPOA, that will determine the nature of the security threats, although the Gulf states have made a clear commitment to stay the course and continue talks with Iran on rapprochement. Meanwhile, the Iranians appear open to more engagement and regional cooperation, even though they continue to be cautious. Overall, while the current geopolitical conflict drivers are reduced, there remain areas of great contention and risks of rupture that could plunge the region into renewed confrontation, notably in Syria and Iraq.

Finally, a generational divide that has defined much of the discourse over the last decade remains potent in discussions and regional dialogues. While such drivers have encouraged events such as the 2010-11 Arab Spring uprisings and those that followed in 2019, as well as continued opposition, some semblance of hope has emerged in Lebanon and Iraq with the recent election results, even as the old guard stands firm and opposes reform. However, the most prominent signs of both the generational split and renewed forms of activism growing outside of state control are the reinvigoration of both the Palestinian cause and the fight for self-determination. New forms of civic engagement and activism are working outside state lines and far removed from the institutional barriers of the peace process — be it Oslo, the U.N. Quartet, or regional regimes. Such activism is breathing life into a global solidarity movement that will continue to create discomfort between the region's people and its regimes as the young mobilize against the treatment of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories while their leaders embrace Israel.



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