

The Middle East: A Review of Geopolitical Structures, Vectors of Power Dynamic

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Global Research, January 12, 2019

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

The Middle East is of essential importance to the world. It serves as a center for the world's energy balance and for the transit of goods through the Suez. It harbors the Holy City of three world religions. It is a center of extreme and deadlocked conflicts. Some of the states are internally unstable, even though in general they are extremely militarized. One of the countries is a nuclear power, and several of them have mighty armies and are among the biggest purchasers of weapons in the world. Regional powers in most parts of the world have a stable "zone of influence/control" around themselves, at least in three out of four directions, but in the Middle East antagonistic powers are clustered. Non-state violence and terrorism proliferates and extends out to other parts of the world, including the EU, Russia and the US. The populations are young, dynamic, highly politicized and generally well-educated, often tending to be unruly. And as passive protests in the region are often suppressed, substantial groups can be prone to violence. The number and types of conflicts are numerous with land claiming, multiple ethnic and religious divisions, social tensions, youth unemployment, gender and class divisions. Moreover, all the major powers of the world are projecting military or economic power into the region.

Structures

The Middle East is here defined as a core region rounded by Egypt, the Levant, Turkey, Iran and the Arab Peninsula. Since Turkey is actively projecting power into the Middle East, it is included as a part of the region for analytical purposes.

When making a future study, it is important to look for some long-term structures, to get a clearer focus on the variables. Thus, we see that the Middle East, as here defined, has crystallized into two parts: A North, consisting of Turkey, Iran, and Syria with Russia's input, and including Iraq which is becoming increasingly self-conscious in its balanced cooperation with two antagonists: Iran and the US. The US works with Kurdish provinces in this North, but generally, the US position in the North is weak and tends to weaken further. A South has a strong US-supported axis of Israel and Saudi Arabia at its core, with Egypt being largely dependent upon these two. Saudi Arabia also projects power towards Kuwait and the other states of the Arab Peninsula. Contested grounds are Lebanon, Qatar, Yemen, Gaza, and the West Bank, as well as pockets of Sunni insurgents in Syria and Iraq.

Some areas will change in less obvious ways, more gradually. Turkey is rather successfully defining a self-conscious new and very independent geopolitical position for itself. Turkey must be expected to continue on this path for 10-15 years. Israel has a very strong internal dynamic, which withstands a lot of pressure. The pressure on Israel has a high chance of increasing externally, and internally Israel's economy and demography will be shaped by two facts: The Jewish population is less fertile than the Arab population in both Israel, Gaza,

and the West bank, and emigration of Jews exceeds the immigration. Jewish emigration is expected to increase due to external pressures, and though efforts are undertaken to attract more Jews from Europe, this dynamic will take a lot of economic power and brains away from Israel. However, Israel with its current political construction, is expected to withstand these pressures for at least another 15 years more. Yemen is expected to be in constant deep trouble. Gaza is expected to continue as today, or even worse. The West Bank may continue as it is today or destabilize into a "Gaza-situation." The Gulf states of Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Oman are with a relatively high degree of probability expected to continue their existing path. The futures of Bahrain and Qatar, however, depend highly on developments in Saudi Arabia.

Vectors of power dynamics are especially strong from Saudi Arabia. Today, Egypt depends on Saudi Arabian money for stability, and Egypt is a key member of the Saudi led "Arab Response Force", by some called "Arab NATO". Yemen, at the Bab el-Mandeb strait and close to the Asir region (one of the last to be included into Saudi Arabia after an uneasy treaty with Yemen, 1934), has always been strategic for Saudi Arabia. Bahrain's kingdom depends on external military support, and Qatar can potentially be invaded by Saudi Arabia. Jordan's king ruling over a 2/3 Palestinian population needs Saudi money and is pressed by Saudi power. Palestinians also need Saudi money. Saudi Arabia projects power through Sunni groups into western Iraq and into eastern Syria and Idlib. Israel and Saudi Arabia work together. Also vectors of power are strong from Iran with Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and potentially Bahrain and Qatar. And vectors of power are very strong from Turkey into northern Syria and northern Iraq. The USA works military especially through Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, but with cooperation also in Iraq and with Kurds in Iraq and Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. Russia works together with especially Turkey, Iran and Syria. These power vectors may change in connection with internal issues in some countries, notably Saudi Arabia.

Islam is not going to be the constant which many experts expect. Islam has been abused as ideology among extreme groups, all of whom may destabilize a country or even hold isolated territory for a few years, but none of these will ever permanently rule a functioning state. In political turnovers, Islam tends to develop into a more pragmatic direction after entering power in a state working with an educated population and the outside world. We saw that in Iran after the Revolution. We see pragmatic Islam in Turkey. We saw the Muslim Brotherhood as quite pragmatic, when shortly in power in Egypt. We may thus expect that even if Saudi Arabia should experience a more religious system-change. The subsequent turn to a more pragmatic Islam, once carrying the burden of political responsibility, will also apply there. For the sake of this argument, though out of scope of this analysis, it might be added, that even should the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan, Taliban would this time also be forced to evolve into a much more pragmatic (though perhaps not directly "liberal") direction.

It is relevant to divide the further analysis into groups of scenarios: "improvement," "deterioration" in socio-economic conditions, and geographically looking respectively at the "North" and the "South." This creates 4 scenarios. And due to the pivotal role of Saudi power projection, it is practical to start with area where Saudi Arabia is located, that is, the "South."

The South

We speak here of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar. With possible implications into the “North”: Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

Saudi Arabia is pivotal for the whole region and is unstable at the same time. The current path is pointing to an ever more oppressive system, concentrating power and stagnant wealth into the hands of a very small group. Such system will become ever more toxic to the outside world, will mostly deal in “oil and weapons”, and will not succeed in diversifying the economy away from oil. Such a path may be prone to wars. The duration of such a system will depend on the oil prices. If oil-prices go up, due to long-term instabilities or some “peak-oil” strain in meeting the future global demand for oil, such a system may survive for 15 years. Alternatively, the political family-system can be thoroughly “reengineered” (with US involvement) which can result in a more “liberal” and very successful path. Alternatively, oppression can lead to a takeover by a group of high-ranking military-cleric key-persons, leading to a more religious system, which once in power, after an initial period may even end up being more pragmatic flexible than today.

Egypt is a very young country with a rather well-educated, politically active, restless, and disenfranchised youth with few employment opportunities. According to the international sources, the level of political oppression in Egypt today is at extraordinary high levels. The previous system under Mubarak was a military government in civilian clothes, and it broke down. Muslim Brotherhood government was democratically elected but rejected by the USA, which engineered a return to exactly the same system, which had already broken down once under Mubarak. Basically, nothing has changed, except for bigger use of force. The situation in Egypt is therefore largely unstable. A big stream of US-Israeli ‘force-instruments’ in the form of weapons, under-cover operations and military/police training, and of Saudi Arabian money continually flow to uphold “stability” in Egypt. If this inflow stops due to political change in Saudi Arabia, or in the USA (isolationistic mood), the situation in Egypt may ignite. But even if the existing “inflow” of ‘force-instruments’ continues, is not enough to maintain stability of the political system in the long run. Popular actions against the political system may next time not be as peaceful as with the case of the Tahrir Square, but armed and very violent. The long trend of widespread armed attacks in Egypt, especially in Sinai, may be just the precursor for a much bigger change. Egypt is on its way with economic reforms, and the IMF has a very positive outlook on improving Egypt’s economy – if substantial growth materializes and turns into a long-term social-economic improvement for the majority, Egypt could in 10-15 years develop into either a more ‘liberal’ democracy, or a new democratic leadership by the Muslim Brotherhood. But if the beautiful IMF prognoses should disappoint, or not benefit the majority, Egypt with soon 100+ million young, restless inhabitants might break-down in a chaos similar to Libya and Syria.

SOUTH in region	
DETERIORATION in socio-economic conditions	IMPROVEMENT in socio-economic conditions
<p>Saudi Arabia's path continues to an ever more oppressive system. Wealth and power become concentrated within an ever smaller group. The country becomes extremely "toxic" to the rest of the world. Diversification away from oil stops, and the country mostly deals in "arms and oil".</p> <p>Egypt</p> <p>(a) Becomes ever more oppressive. Attempts to invigorate the economy fail. Terrorism. (b) War in Egypt (like Libya + Syria).</p> <p>Jordan follows a similar path to Egypt.</p> <p>Bahrain continues as it is today.</p> <p><u>"Black Swans"</u>:</p> <p>Qatar may experience an invasion from Saudi Arabia, resulting in a more oppressive system.</p> <p>Iraq in the North, may, but this is more uncertain, also experience a Saudi invasion in the Sunni dominated west, going all the way up to eastern Syria.</p> <p>Lebanon in North, may experience invasion by Israel in the south "ended" by the insertion of a Saudi- Egyptian dominated "Arab Peace Force" into Beirut – effectively an occupation.</p>	<p>Saudi Arabia:</p> <p>(a) The political family-system is changed with US engineering. The country liberalizes. (b) The oppressive systems are turned-over by militaries-clericals, creating a religiously dominated system. As clerics go into the responsibility of governing, they conduct reforms.</p> <p>Egypt:</p> <p>(a) Economic reforms succeed. The country evolves in a liberal direction. (b) The Muslim Brotherhood comes to power as a relatively pragmatic force. Jordan follows a path similar to that of Egypt.</p> <p>Bahrain ends the kingdom after protests.</p> <p>Qatar continues as hitherto.</p>
<p>Israel, Gaza and the West Bank continue their existing increase in tensions (as described above). Yemen continues to be war-torn. Kuwait, the UAE and Oman continue their current path.</p>	

The North

Iran will in all cases continue with the basic structure of its existing political system. But whether the system hardens or develops in a more open direction will widely depend on exterior conditions. Sanctions have (nearly) never been able to force a political change, and US sanctions will be counter-acted by the rest of the world economy. Should US sanctions, however, against expectations become effective, they may lower the living conditions of ordinary Iranians. An air war including US occupation of strips of land along the coast near the Strait of Hormuz is possible, and with Iran's capabilities, such a war would mean diminished oil deliveries from the Persian Gulf for a very long time, possibly half a year, easily triggering a world economic crisis. A wider US land war is not foreseeable, because such a war in Iran would be much bigger than the war in Iraq, which the US could not manage. A "black swan" possibility is, if the USA abandons its stark enmity against Iran, and Israel then decides "on its own" to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities with nuclear-tipped missiles, letting the USA "clean-up-the-mess" which will follow. Such an action would create a very unfavorable global response towards Israel.

NORTH in region	
DETERIORATION in socio-economic conditions	IMPROVEMENT in socio-economic conditions
<p>Iran, political system continues in all cases. (a) Effective US sanctions set back Iran. (b) US air-war sets back Iran further. "Black swan": Will Israel destroy Iran nuclear sites with nuclear missiles? That would ignite a long-term war, and increase EU support for Iran. Iraq gets torn by political factions. Oil-wealth gets stolen by corruption. Syria experiences "peace" by oppression and without any reconstruction. Lebanon becomes a war-ground for Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran, incl. proxy-forces.</p>	<p>Iran experiences a historic improvement in living conditions. Sanctions never work. The political system reforms step-by-step. Iraq becomes a strong and self-confident economy with substantial military power. Foreign companies are managed on Iraqi conditions, and Iraq successfully balances USA, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the EU. Syria with Russian and Iranian management on the ground, and benevolence from Turkey, experiences successful reconstruction – first by China, soon followed up by the EU. The Baath party continues, with new leaders. Lebanon is stabilized and becomes again "the Switzerland of the Middle East".</p>
<p>Kurdish areas may experience their own future, or a future joint with Syria/Iraq, respectively. With the US support, they can remain in a very independent position but without state-recognition. As such, they can continue, but may languish, being "sandwiched" between Turkey and Syria/Iraq. Alternatively, with effective guarantees, they can become self-governing regions in Syria and Iraq, taking part in the future of these two countries. Possible is a Turkish invasion to limit Kurdistan.</p>	
<p>Turkey will continue to develop successfully on a path very independent from the USA and the EU.</p>	

Prospects for key actors

Israel will not enjoy better conditions in its neighborhood than today. Any change in political conditions in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan would be a step down for Israel, no matter which direction such a change would take. If Egypt and Jordan descend into chaos, that would create two enormous "gaza-like" neighbors. Saudi Arabia and Egypt would only become advanced liberal economies, if the current regimes changed, bringing the populations closer to power, and all these populations are less friendly to Israel than their current governments are. Situation is similar for Syria. If no reconstruction takes place, and Syria continues as chaos, it will become a "gaza-like" neighbor. If Syria is properly reconstructed, it will become a strong, unfriendly neighbor to Israel. Israel cannot really win here. There are no signs that Israeli policies in Gaza and the West Bank will change in the next 10-15 years, and this will only increase the Palestinian pressure on Israel. Emigration out of Israel will therefore tend to increase, and the attractiveness of moving to Israel will diminish – the emigration is already larger than the immigration. If the US and European interests in supporting Israel in the next 10-15 years diminish even slightly, this will only add to Israel's problems.

The US similarly will over the next 10-15 years probably not face better conditions in the Middle East, than we witness today. Israel, the key US ally in the region, though basically maintaining a status-quo, will rather become relatively weakened than strengthened. Saudi Arabia and Egypt are next in close ties to the US in the region: both countries face a very uncertain political future. Any change in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan will only be for worse for the US. Iran will continue as it is – the US may "contain" Iran with sanctions, but the US cannot change Iran's nature, not with sanctions, not even with an (air) war. Iraq will over time become even more independent of the US, especially if Sunni insurgencies are put down, and Kurdistan stabilizes. In Syria, the US has only lost. The future of Syria will be shaped by Russia and Iran, in cooperation with Turkey – and if they manage this task well, they have great chances to succeed, even against US interests.

Russia made a high-stake gamble by intervening in Syria – and won. Russia already had

friendly relations with Iran and followed up by very intelligently (and surprisingly) creating a good working relationship with Turkey. Russia's gain in the Middle East will be long-term, as long as Russia can continue good working relations with Turkey and Iran. It is now up to Russia to take the lead in designing and managing Syria's stabilization, political administration and reconstruction with investments from international investors, including Asia and the EU.

Asia – China, India and two great and successful Asian Muslim countries Malaysia and Indonesia may see great business opportunities by participating in Syria's reconstruction. This, however, requires Russia's successful lead in the process. Good working relations especially between Russia and the dynamic economies of China and India can be a major platform to get this started on.

The EU for security-reasons simply cannot afford Syria to stay in chaos, generating terrorism and refugees into Europe. The EU can therefore – with or even against the good will of EU governments – be more or less forced to participate in Syria's reconstruction. Especially, if Russia shows she can manage that process orderly together with Iran and Turkey, and probably China in the role as a leading investor. France (militarily) and Germany (economically) can hence enter as leading partners together with Russia in Syria. All provided, of course, that Russia demonstrates ability to start this process up in a practical and at least somehow acceptable way for the EU.

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This article was originally published on [Russian Council](#).

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