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Middle East: Consequences  
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# Renewed Iran-Israel Rivalry in the Middle East: Consequences for the Arab World

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## Abstract

*Despite being an Arab issue, Arab states are not actively pursuing the Palestinian cause. Instead, they are more flexible and open to fostering diplomatic relations with Israel. However, despite the normalisation of its ties with most of the Arab states, Israel finds it difficult to justify its position in the region. The primary factor in this regard is the staunch opposition of Iran and its policy of arming the non-state armed actors in the region. These developments testify that conflict dynamics in the Middle East have been transformed. While the transformation has resulted in the lateral peace accords that are discussed in this paper, these accords have failed to bring peace to the region. The pivotal cause of it is the power transition which these accords have brought in which Arab states have remained on the back burner. By utilising the qualitative methodology and descriptive approach, this paper attempts to explain the changing dynamics of the Middle*

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*East given the Iran-Israel rivalry that shape the policies of the Arab states.*

**Keywords:** Middle East, conflict transformation, Iran-Israel, GCC, Palestine

## **Introduction**

The persistent conflict in the post-World War II Middle East has been marked by inter-state rivalries. In this context, two rivalries have remained frontrunners in determining the conflictual dynamics of the region: Arab-Israel and Arab-Persian. The results of these rivalries eventually led to the weakening of Arab states which gave way to their compromising and reconciliatory approach towards both Israel and Iran. Furthermore, since Arab states have signed peace accords with both Israel and Iran, the intensity of these rivalries has, to an extent, subsided. Nonetheless, the conflict in the region still prevails, especially after the October 7 attack of Hamas and the subsequent military action taken by Israel.

The ongoing conflictual dynamics in the region have taken an alternative route from the traditional discourse. For the first time in the modern history of the Middle East, the leading parties in the conflict are not Arabs. While it is true that the conflicts are occurring in the Arab states, the main drivers of those conflicts are non-Arab states. In this case, the Palestine issue that has always remained the cornerstone of Middle Eastern politics has been transformed from being an Arab-Israel confrontation to an Iran-Israel conflict considering Iran's relations with Hamas and Hezbollah.

Similarly, the actions undertaken by Iraqi militias and Yemeni Houthis against Israel in the aftermath of the Hamas

attack also point towards coordination between Iran and its proxy partners. Eventually, the direct attack of Iran on Israel for the first time, in response to the Israeli attack on the consular section of the Iranian embassy in Damascus, highlighted the transformation of conflict in the Middle East. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyse the changing dynamics of the region and explores the following queries:

1. How is the regional conflict in the Middle East transforming?
2. Which factors depict the transformation of conflict in the Middle East?

To investigate these queries, the paper attempts to argue that the weakening of Arab states in conflicts with Iran and Israel resulted in the change of power structure in the Middle East that favours non-Arab states like Iran and Israel. This has further resulted in conflict transformation in the region.

### **Arab-Israel Rivalry**

The Arab-Israel rivalry has been the main source of chaos and conflicts in the Middle East since World War II. The fulcrum of this enmity has been the Palestinian question between the Arabs and the Zionist Jews, both claiming ownership of the Palestinian territory.

The first war between the Arab states and Israel was the extension of the civil war that spurred between the Jewish and Palestinian Arab societies. Beginning in November 1947, the Jewish volunteer force 'Haganah' and Palestinian civilian forces, rebranded as the Arab Liberation Army (ALA) in January 1948 and duly supported and funded by the Arab League initiated attacks against each other's cities, villages, and isolated regions. The

initial success of the ALA was overshadowed by Haganah's counter-offensive in April 1948, codenamed as 'Plan D', that aimed to defend the areas allotted to Israel as well as gain control of the Jewish settlements that lay inside the proposed Palestinian territory.<sup>1</sup> Resultantly, the huge influx of Palestinian refugees compelled the Arab States to invade in May 1948. However, the outcome of the war resulted in an overall defeat for Arabs as they failed to liberate the Palestinian territories. On the contrary, Israel managed to attain an extra 22 per cent of Palestinian land.<sup>2</sup>

The 1948 war resulted in the emergence of a nationalistic Arab ideology called Baathism after Jamal Abdel Nasser's rise to power in the 1952 coup d'état. Subsequently, Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal in 1956 and closed the Gulf of Aqaba, which threatened Israeli freedom of navigation.<sup>3</sup> This event provided Israel the opportunity to rally with European great powers (Britain and France) against Egypt to capture the Sinai Peninsula from where the Palestinian groups were launching attacks against Israel.<sup>4</sup> Hence, through a tripartite settlement, Israel initiated the attack upon Egypt, making it a *casus belli*.<sup>5</sup> However, owing to mounting international pressure and UNSC Resolution 997, the UK, France, and Israel had to withdraw their forces by March 1957. The outcome of this crisis was a humiliating defeat of the allied powers along with Israel, while Nasser enjoyed the popular support of Arab masses across the region.<sup>6</sup>

The wars of 1967 and 1973 between Arabs and Israel, therefore, took place in the protraction of growing Arab-Israel mutual resentments. By 1967, Arabs, mainly Egypt and Syria, with nationalistic governments continued to support the Palestinian guerilla movements. Egypt went a step ahead and deployed its forces in the Sinai Peninsula after the withdrawal of the UN

peacekeeping forces that had been stationed since the aftermath of the Suez crisis.<sup>7</sup> Acting pre-emptively, Israel launched air raids over the Egyptian forces which crippled their strength almost instantly. Furthermore, Israel also dealt a severe blow to the Jordanian and Syrian forces that were about to attack Israel in support of Egypt with a casualty ratio of 25:1 in Israel's favour.<sup>8</sup> The end of the war established Israel as an unmatched regional power and led to the unpopularity of Arab rulers as Nasser had to shun his idea of Pan-Arabism, and the Syrian regime was toppled by a coup d'état in 1970.

Arabs' attempts to regain the lost territories of Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula through negotiations were also rejected by Israel. The failure to negotiate the post-war settlements provoked Egypt and Syria to initiate yet another war with Israel in 1973, along with the support of Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> Despite the initial gains, the counterattack by Israel with US support broke the defence lines of both Egypt and Syria and Israel managed to infiltrate deep into the Arab territories. Although the war ended with Israel's victory, the cost was high in terms of casualties with 2,500 deaths and a financial cost of \$5 to \$6 billion.<sup>10</sup>

The persistent Arab-Israel conflict made both parties realise their shortcomings. Arabs acknowledged their military inferiority vis-à-vis Israel and that Israel could not be simply wiped out. On the other hand, Israel also grasped the notion of a hostile neighbourhood and, despite having military superiority, realised that engaging multiple adversaries in multiple theatres was costly.<sup>11</sup> These shifts in perception led to the era of 'Cold Peace' as, despite the initiation of diplomatic relations by Egypt and Jordan and trade of Oman and Qatar with Israel, the cordiality in these

ties was absent due to security issues and the persisting Palestine issue.<sup>12</sup>

However, in the post-9/11 period, both the parties faced similar threats from Islamic militancy and in the post-Arab Spring years, the same actors faced a mutual threat from the growing concept of Political Islam supported by Iran, leading to the convergence of their interests. These developments transformed the era of Cold Peace into fully established ties between Arab states and Israel through the Abraham Accords in 2020.

### **Arab-Persian Rivalry**

Though the Arab-Persian rivalry is historical, spanning centuries, in the modern era, territorial disputes remained the principal issue specifically between the Arab states and Iran after World War II. Iranian claims on Bahrain, the islands of the UAE, and the river-gate in Iraq directly challenged the sovereignty of Arabs. The river-gate issue between Iran and Iraq, otherwise known as the *Shatt Al-Arab* conflict, symbolised the boundary between the Persians and Arabs. Although the dispute was resolved in 1975 through Algerian mediation with the signing of the Tehran Protocol, the Iran-Iraq war nonetheless reinstated the dispute between the two countries and expanded it across the entire region.<sup>13</sup> This was due to Saddam Hussein's elevated posture of the 'Saviour of Arabs' and the symbolism of 'Pan-Arabism' against Iran. Nevertheless, in the post-Saddam period, meetings between the premiers of both States in 2014 to discuss the delimitation of *Shatt Al-Arab* diffused the dispute.

Still, Iranian territorial disputes with other states like the UAE and Bahrain persist to date and have a ripple effect on the overall Arab-Persian rivalry. The Shah's claim over Bahrain,

stemming from historical roots, subsided immediately after the withdrawal of British forces from the Persian Gulf in 1970 as a part of Anglo-Persian understanding.<sup>14</sup> The Shah gave up the claims over Bahrain to ensure Persian hegemony over the Persian Gulf as a replacement for British power. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the historical and nationalistic claim on Bahrain was refuelled. Since the revolution, Iranian clerics have been pursuing the lines of advocating Iranian territorial claim over Bahrain as its 14<sup>th</sup> province.<sup>15</sup> The Arab Spring also favoured Iranian geopolitical goals as the Shi'ite uprising against the Sunni and Saudi-backed Al-Khalifa Regime was perceived as an attempt of Iranian interference and expansionism. As a result, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states sent their forces in 2011 to ensure the survival of the Al-Khalifa Regime and to minimise the impact of the Arab Spring. Notwithstanding the issue of Bahrain, Iran under Shah effectively took control of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands in the Persian Gulf in 1971, much to the distress of the UAE. This continued to be the policy in the post-1979 period as well. One of the major factors behind the establishment of the GCC in 1981, was to resolve the UAE-Iran island dispute in Arabs' favour.<sup>16</sup> All three of these islands are located at the strategic point of the Strait of Hormuz through which 40 per cent of the global oil supplies pass regularly. Despite consistent attempts by the UAE and other Gulf states to raise the issue in the UN and with the EU, Iran continues to have possession of these islands.

Apart from these territorial disputes, Iran has also been supporting different movements and organisations to promote its version of Political Islam. Since 1979, Iran has been successful primarily in two countries: Syria and Lebanon. Syria has remained



the only Arab state which has stood by Iran since its inception. Both Syria and Iran are opposed to Israel and sponsor Palestinian resistance. In Lebanon, Iran helped in the establishment of Hezbollah which remained the chief Iranian proxy partner in the region. Not only is Hezbollah considered to be the extension of the Iranian Revolution in Lebanon but through its victory in the elections of 2018, in which it won 76 seats out of 128 along with its allies, it has also provided a smooth ingress of Iran into the political and defence spheres of Lebanon, leading to the resignation of Saad Al-Hariri from the premiership of Lebanon in 2019.

The eroding influence of the Gulf states and their increasing rift with Iran continued to occur in Syria and Yemen in the backdrop of their respective civil wars. In Syria, Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman recalled their ambassadors in 2011, immediately after the outbreak of the civil war. Moreover, the Gulf states initially coordinated with the US-led coalition to sponsor the Free Syrian Army, an umbrella organisation of the opposition groups. In 2014, when the US shifted its operational focus from arming the rebels to striking the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Gulf states along with Turkey formed yet another umbrella alliance named 'Jaish Al-Fatah' which comprised Islamic militant groups.<sup>17</sup> However, due to the divergent interests of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the opposition fragmented and this coincided with the increasing support of the Russo-Iranian nexus to the Assad regime and the recapturing of Aleppo by Syrian forces, symbolising the reinstatement of Syria's sovereignty.

Similarly, in Yemen, the military campaign of Saudi Arabia along with nine other countries against Houthis remained futile.

Houthis have managed to consolidate their authority over North Yemen, including the capital Saana. Iranian support to Houthis has been explicit in terms of diplomacy and arms, as certain missiles fired by Houthis towards Saudi Arabia were found containing Iranian technology. However, in terms of regional outlook, Houthis support the Iranian stance regarding Palestine and condemn the Gulf states and Israel, hence, making Yemen another centre for Iranian ideological growth. On the other hand, the strength of the Gulf states was further weakened due to the Saudi-UAE rift over the discourse of the Yemen civil war. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which supports the government's forces, the UAE has been sponsoring the Southern Transitional Council which aims at the independence of Southern Yemen.

The inability of Gulf states to curtail the political and ideological clout of Iran in the region alongside their failure to topple Assad and Houthis from Syria and Yemen, respectively, resulted in the reconciliation of Arab states with Iran. It was evident with the 2023 Saudi-Iran peace deal which was followed by the return of Syria to the Arab League and the visit of a Saudi delegation to the Yemeni capital Sanaa for peace negotiations. The peace deal with Iran, readmitting Syria into the Arab League and accepting the legitimacy of Houthis in Yemen, pointed to the reconciliatory approach by the Arab states towards Iran owing to the latter's growing influence that might be detrimental to the interests of Arab states.

### **Reorientation of Regional Rivalries and Conflict Transformation**

The division within the Arab world has weakened the very essence of Arab nationalism through which they persist in

associating themselves with the Middle Eastern region. That is one reason the non-Arab states of the region have gained prominence. The spheres of influence in which these non-Arab states exert their power exist within the Arab-dominated areas which further sow the seeds of disunion. Unlike the Cold War in which two camps prevailed in the Arab world, the present circumstances showcase a gloomier picture of the Arabs' fate. Two factors are primarily responsible for this disunion. First, the internationalisation of the Middle East has been transformed into regionalisation and instead of the global powers, regional powers are the main drivers of the geopolitics. This is also evident from the US policy shift from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific, in efforts to concentrate on rising China. Similarly, Russian military and political influence in the Middle East is limited primarily to the Syrian state. Meanwhile, China is more focused on economic aspects and doesn't promote its ideology in terms of politics. Therefore, the threat perception emerging from the regional powers is far more severe than that of the global powers, owing to the proximity.

Hence, where the Cold War witnessed the creation of blocs within the Arab world, the post-Arab Spring environment has focused on individual Arab states for their respective interests. That is why Arab states of the Middle East are generally divided into three groups. The larger Gulf region (except Qatar) along with Egypt and Jordan are aligning themselves with Israel, as evident from the 2020 Abraham Accords. States like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and the Gaza Strip are the exclusive power zones for Iran while Qatar and political factions of the Muslim Brotherhood are associating themselves with Turkey. Despite these alignments, the Arab states still maintain their unique characteristic of

association with the region, specifically at the domestic level. For example, although the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan have normalised their relations with Israel, the emotional attachment of the Arab publics to Palestine is significant and can put pressure on the Arab governments to reconsider their tilt towards Israel. That is why, despite sharing common apprehensions against Iran and having a partnership with the US, Saudi Arabia has yet to recognize Israel. Likewise, the influential role of Iran in Iraq and Lebanon did not result in diffusing the 2019-20 protests in these countries in which the protestors openly demonstrated their displeasure with the Iran-backed governments in these countries.<sup>18</sup> Second, the GCC states which represent the core of the Arab world, have also been experiencing a foreign policy shift. During the Cold War and in the post-Cold War years until the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, their unity has been primarily based upon oil politics. Nevertheless, the importance of oil resources is depleting, and different issues are culminating in differences among these historically tightly knitted Gulf countries. In this sense, it can be inferred here that a rift is emerging within the Arab countries and specifically the Gulf countries.

One of the reasons is that the regional countries have an independent approach towards their policies instead of looking up to the Saudi leadership. For example, the UAE is seemingly embarking on a foreign policy trajectory of its own. While going out of the way, the UAE is getting involved in inter-regional alliances which have regional significance like the Middle Eastern Quad, officially I2U2. If this Quadruple alliance becomes successful, it will not only impact regional dynamics but also intra-regional alliances. Whatever the significance of such alliances, the

important factor is the UAE's departure from the traditional policy of acting under Saudi domination. Qatar shares similar sentiments, as is evident from the blockade imposed by the Saudi-led coalition on Qatar in 2017. Although the Al-Ula Summit resulted in the normalisation of GCC-Qatar ties, Qatar's shift to Turkey remained steadfast. The Saudi attempt to rejuvenate relations with Qatar can be regarded as a failed attempt to bring Qatar back into its ambit. Turkey is more than willing to keep Qatar close while competing with Saudi Arabia for regional hegemony and supporting its role as the leader of the Muslim world. Moreover, Iran's regional activism is not a new phenomenon. It has a well-consolidated alliance with Syria and a significant political and strategic influence in Iraq and Lebanon. Whether it is through proxies, logistical support, or moral support, Iran is maintaining its stronghold in the region against the Arab countries. In this sense, it can be concluded that the Arab countries are going through regional realignment primarily due to differences among them. The Arab countries could not maintain their unity even through multilateral platforms such as the Arab League or GCC.

These divisions amongst the Arab states have led to the rise of non-Arab countries in the region like Turkey, Iran, and Israel where the latter two have much larger space to influence to the extent that their respective spheres of influence collide to place them in confrontation with each other. In this case, the Palestine issue presents the perfect case study of the Iran-Israel confrontation. Despite being an Arab and Sunni entity, Hamas is mainly sponsored and armed by Iran and due to its military activities against Israel, the Palestinian cause is mostly advocated by Iran. The Israeli strikes on the Iranian embassy in Damascus in

2024 amidst the ongoing Gaza War pointed to the fact that Israel considers Iran the main instigator of the October 7 attacks and its aftermath. On the other hand, the activation of the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance against Israel, ranging from Houthis' attacks on Israeli cargo ships in the Red Sea to drone and rocket attacks by Iraqi militias against Israel, underpin the fact that conflict in the Middle East has been transformed where Arab states are more reconciliatory and the non-Arab states (Iran and Israel) are increasingly asserting themselves to influence the regional structure.

## **Conclusion**

Conflict transformation suggests that the dynamics of conflicts can be positively converted to result in the de-intensification of conflict and peacebuilding. However, Ramio Vayrynen's theory of conflict transformation presents the idea of power dynamics and the existence of multiple actors making conflicts more complex. The Middle East presents a similar case scenario in which multiple actors are involved in different alliances that make the conflictual dynamics of the region more complex. The gradual weakening of Arab states due to changing power dynamics instigated by external actors as well as their internal divisions and different visions for the region created a vacuum for the non-Arab states to become major actors in the Middle East. The emergence of non-Arab states transformed traditional conflicts as exemplified by the Palestinian case. The main adversaries now are Iran and Israel, i.e., non-Arab states, while the pivotal arenas for their conflict pursuance are Arab territories, i.e., Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Conclusively, the transformation of conflict in the Middle East, instead of creating

positive undercurrents, created more intense and aggressive interactions between the rival parties that have made the region a sensitive spot from which the conflict may be spurred across the neighbourhood.

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