



Geopolitics of the New Middle East: Perspectives from Inside and Outside

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In the last decade, the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional security environment has been shaped by the cycle of insecurity and instability. The structural transformation in the MENA has unleashed such forces whereby the region has been destabilized by multi-faceted conflicts, which have seen the involvement of many local, regional and global actors. The risks and security challenges produced by the wave of instability and conflicts have altered the international relations of the MENA region to a significant extent.

A retroactive reading suggests that a decade of turmoil was triggered mainly by the demands for political transformation observed in several countries. The broader transitions in the international order have also significantly accelerated the pace and direction of regional restructuring. The transformation of the regional order has been sparked by wave of popular uprisings, called the Arab Spring. Although the promise of democratic transformation heralded by the initial phase of the Arab Spring generated optimism, in its second phase, the regional transformation has increasingly been viewed in pessimistic terms. The initial prognoses for democratization produced mixed feelings about the future direction of regional transformation. However, no actor's efforts alone were enough to assist the political transformation agenda, and diverging positions pursued by different international actors resulted in the stalling of political reforms. Increasingly, the region has been drawn into a cycle of violence as observed in Libya, Syria or Iraq, creating myriad security challenges that are threatening the local actors, as well as producing security externalities for the international system at large. This new security environment eventually altered the regional and extra-regional attitudes towards the issue of political transformation, narrowing the scope for a reform agenda.

Today, we can retroactively reflect on the overlapping processes of the reconfiguration of the states, the region and regional security dynamics, the broad parameters of which have taken some shape for now. Socio-economic pressures, various conflicts and extra-regional involvement have undermined the foundations of the regional order, with significant repercussions for the identities, borders, balance of power and alignments. Protracted civil wars, the emergence of non-state actors, proxy wars, and external interventions further undermined the semblance of a normative order. While many states of the region are struggling to preserve their sovereignty and territorial integrity, others have chosen to realign their partners. For some time, to accentuate the pressures on the nation-states and the borders, the discussions were centred on the future of the Sykes-Picot order, which arguably laid the foundations of the modern Middle Eastern

states-system in the post-Ottoman era. As the centennial anniversary of the Sykes-Picot arrangements passed, the state borders have proven resilient, though the meaning and composition of putative nation-states is still being renegotiated.

Perhaps the most drastic and long-lasting impact of the structural transformation has been on the regional security dynamics. As the various stakeholders have been unable to stabilize the region, MENA international affairs have been further securitized. When regional actors failed to develop effective instruments to prevent, mitigate or stabilize either political disputes or military conflicts, the region's characteristic as a sub-system that is prone to the international penetration came to the forefront. Indeed, from their very beginning, the crises in the region have been internationalized. The Arab uprisings triggered the regional and global geopolitical rivalries in the MENA region. From its beginning, the geostrategic structures based on the pro-Western vs. anti-Western dichotomy were shattered. This was largely due to the US administration's wavering on the decision of whether to side with the protesters or America's long-time authoritarian allies. In any case, the American intuitive support for popular revolts emboldened rather than discouraged region-wide counter-revolutionary impulses. The involvement of extra-regional actors, on balance, has been far from constructive, reflecting either the poor state of international conflict resolution mechanisms or the clash of interests shaping international reactions. The declining commitment of the international community and the policy of containment and relative disengagement deepened the vacuum of regional security governance. Today, the MENA region is perceived riskier than what it was at the outset of the Arab Spring, due to a multitude of destabilizing factors.

This special issue will survey the main drivers and emerging contours of the new Middle Eastern geopolitics. It will present perspectives from some of the regional players, as well as extra-regional actors.

Contributions

In their contribution, Eduard Soler Lecha and Silvia Colombo examine the emergence of a new order in MENA from a European perspective. They problematize the drivers of the European conceptualizations of this region, which stands on the European Union's (EU) 'southern neighborhood.' They take issue with the scholarship that has paid scant attention to the mutual dependencies between the EU's reactions and major geopolitical transformations that take place at the regional and domestic levels in the countries of the region. They call for exploring new policy responses that take into account the interconnectedness of the regional transformations and their impact on Europe itself, which among others may require different European approaches to the issues of conflict and cooperation.

Like other contributors, Lecha and Colombo take note of some major geopolitical shifts in the MENA such as the growing influence of the Gulf countries, the pivot to Africa of many of the countries of the region, new dynamics of global penetration related to Russia's renewed ambition, the proliferation of regional cleavages and the volatility of alliances and rivalries. In an attempt to assess their implications for the EU, they trace how the EU has positioned itself in response to domestic and regional conflicts. In particular, they differentiate between the circumstances in which the EU resorted to *engagement strategies* to shape events on the ground by utilizing different

instruments, and other instances in which it opted for *containment and damage-control strategies*. They contend that, having made several hard choices since 2011, the EU is still confronted with the tumultuous challenge of making similar hard choices in the coming years. In short, the EU's engagement in the region still remains as a work in progress; the repercussions of such choices will shape Europe's strategies, policies and tools and will elucidate what kind of an actor the EU will be in the MENA.

In his contribution, Leonid Issaev traces the overall changes in Russian policy in the MENA since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He identifies a broader trend whereby Moscow has started to act on a pragmatic platform in the post-Cold War era, departing from the ideologically driven foreign policy line. Among other implications, he argues that the lack of any ideological component in its foreign policy allowed the Kremlin to pursue a more balanced engagement in the Middle East and maintain working relations with regional countries, simultaneously. This enabled Moscow to develop its trade and economic ties with the region.

Issaev gives a concise account of how the Russian academic and policy community discussed the Arab Spring, and how it eventually led to new policy responses. In that respect, Issaev also observes a shift towards a more aggressive foreign policy line, which was crystallized not only in the post-Arab Spring MENA geopolitics but also in Ukraine as well. In many ways, Russia's direct military intervention in a far-away conflict, i.e., Syrian civil war, revealed the contours of this new course of action. He makes an important observation about the domestic-international nexus in the making of Russian policy. He argues that the intervention in Syria, at its origins, was driven by a quest to resolve Moscow's own internal challenges, namely Russian leadership's effort to divert the people's attention away from the internal economic problems. Nonetheless, the Syria engagement has changed its character such that it turned into a bargaining tool in Moscow's dealing with other global and regional actors. He details how that bargaining strategy functioned in practice.

Remarkably, Issaev believes that the tensions exerted by the domestic-international nexus will likely complicate the Russian leadership's management of this assertive foreign policy line; in his words, the leadership remains 'hostage to public opinion.' Over time, the domestic trends, the shifts in public perceptions of foreign policy, the limited penetration of Russia into the region, accumulation of the costs generated by the military operations in MENA will be major obstacles to constrain the Kremlin. He believes the future role Russia will play in the MENA is also far from settled. Moscow's future involvement in the region will oscillate between playing an 'honest broker' role in the regional conflicts or settling for acting as a 'junior partner' to Washington, Beijing or other actors. In any case, this role will depend on how the Russian leadership manages the tensions at the domestic-international nexus.

In his contribution, Bingbing Wu offers a Chinese view on the emergence of new geopolitical lines of competition among regional actors. He identifies the main line of divisions in the regional balance of power, such as a weakened and divided Arab world vs. powerful non-Arab actors. Moreover, he identifies the growing visibility of some sub-state armed actors along with state actors in the regional hotspots. In particular, he argues that currently there are four geo-strategic axes: competition between Iran and Turkey over the leadership in the Islamic world, an all-out strategic competition between Iran

and Saudi Arabia, competition between a pro-Brotherhood camp and an anti-Brotherhood camp, as well as intra-Arab competition.

Wu then analyzes China's increasing involvement in the MENA region in a historical perspective. Though it is still taking shape, China's policy towards the region is directly related to the principles underpinning its international relations, such as calls for a new form of international relations and a community with a shared future for mankind. Wu claims that China's interest in the MENA is driven by six interrelated dimensions, including strategic, political, energy, economic, security, and cultural interests. Moreover, he also details how China has unleashed some institutional mechanisms of cooperation that supplement a network of partnerships with key regional countries. Within these parameters, China has sought to strengthen its relations with the MENA, through introducing new platforms such as China Arab States Cooperation Forum, bilateral partnerships with regional countries, and Belt and Road Initiative. He observes that neither the United States nor Europe or Russia has the intention or capability to help the Middle East establish a functioning regional cooperation mechanism. Moreover, he notes how China has been absent from discussions on Middle East regionalization. Nonetheless, he puts forward the provocative idea that China's efforts to promote regionalism in West Asia may potentially contribute to the discussions on redesigning a regional security framework.

In his article, Hassan Ahmadian analyzes Iran's strategic conduct in the MENA during the Arab Spring period. In particular, he looks into the causes, aims and scope of Iran's regional policies, which has been one of the most controversial dimensions of the new geopolitics of the region. He in particular provides a succinct insight into the evolution of Iran's strategic planning in the region, i.e., the rationale behind Iran's strategic conduct and growing role in the post-2011 Middle East. Here, he observes a much deeper transformation in Iran's foreign policy, whereby it has also abandoned its tradition of non-alignment and instead embraced a balancing-act strategy after 2011. This balancing act is also altering Iran's non-alignment character such that Tehran no longer sees strategic engagement and cooperation with world powers as diminishing its independent character in world affairs. Now, Iran, more often than not, engages in acts of balancing international powers against each other to fend off the immediate threats to its core interests. As applied to the Middle East, this transformation marks a major process of adaptation. In order to preserve its regional position and defend the 'axis of resistance,' the main rationale of Iran's regional policy now is centred on containing its rivals' anti-status quo policies, which means that Tehran has abandoned its confrontation with the U.S.-backed regional order of pre-2011.

Ahmadian chooses to exclude the domestic dimension of the Iran's regional policy, largely because he believes the grand strategic choices are largely insulated from domestic considerations. Mahjoob Zweiri's contribution, however, sheds light on a highly relevant issue pertaining to the Iran's domestic conduct: the debate surrounding the succession of the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He moves beyond the policy discussions around the potential candidates, and instead seeks to uncover the structural factors that guide the process of choosing the Supreme Leader, as well as the position and role of the next supreme leader. He draws lessons from the historical experience of designating the previous supreme leaders, Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei.

Interestingly, Zweiri does not confine his focus to religious-theological factors only; he underscores a wide array of political, strategic calculations at the domestic and international level that go into the selection process. In particular, the economic hardships inside the country, debates on the extent of religion in politics, and evolving trends in the international arena will be the decisive considerations. In the final analysis, Zweiri argues that given the structure of the political system and institutions of theocracy, the national security apparatus is likely to play a major role in selecting the future leader in Iran.

In his contribution, using Bennett's model as his theoretical framework, Majed Al-Ansari analyzes the trajectory of the Gulf crisis. He identifies the political actors and their irreconcilable demands for limited resources as being the root cause of the political problem. As he aptly puts forward in the article, Gulf crisis is in a state of stalemate. The actors have yet to properly redefine their demands, as all attempts at starting a dialog among the actors have failed. He further argues that without a redefinition of demands, according to Bennett model, no resolution to the political conflict is possible. Also, he discusses how the preconditions for settlement of the crisis seem far from materializing any time soon. The explanatory power of Bennett model's in Gulf crisis is the provision of the framework of analysis for the long-standing crises. In this approach, Saudi hegemonic ambitions will not fade away for a foreseeable future and it is the root cause of the crisis. He suggests that Al-Ula agreement in January 2021 did not fully address to the roots of this fight for hegemony and it is only a temporary solution to the conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

In his article, Şaban Kardaş studies the realist turn in Turkey's Middle East policy, which manifested itself in the new policy instruments employed by Ankara. He claims that Turkey's resort to a coercive posturing since 2015 to eliminate the threats from Syria and Iraq, through the application of cross-border military force, marks a watershed. He details his arguments in a critical case, i.e., Turkey's abandonment of a policy of engagement vis-à-vis the Kurdish revisionist actors in Iraq and Syria, and tilt towards a coercive approach including military posturing.

Kardaş claims that this new orientation reflects the transformations of late in Turkey's strategic environment, whereby it has gone through a steep learning curve, having suffered from a multitude of security risks posed by the unfolding conflicts to its south sparked by the transformation of the Middle Eastern order. Faced with the damaging impact of a radically altered regional security setting which confronted it with the challenge of Kurdish revisionism on its borders, Turkey is more inclined to view the Middle East in realist terms, where threats to its territorial integrity reignited concerns for national survival. By adopting a neoclassical realist framework, Kardaş further contends that the rise of a securitized domestic political environment and a nascent power bloc built on conservative and nationalist foundations accelerated the turn towards realism. He also offers a provisional assessment of the policy implications of this new phase for Turkey's foreign policy orientation.

In their contribution, İdil Öztüğ and Bülent Aras problematize whether the Arab uprisings reverberated in the Caucasus and Central Asia, in terms of their transformative impact on the political regimes there. The rapid diffusion of societal demands for good governance, political rights and civil liberties from one country to another in the MENA region naturally led many to expect that the protests would also spill-over to nearby geographies and beyond. Indeed, a wave of protests also took place in the Central Asia

and Caucasus region in the wake of the Arab Spring. Political opposition in the region mobilized people around issues such as socio-economic difficulties, electoral fraud, restrictions on rights and liberties, and corruption in public service provision. The protests mostly targeted specific working conditions, price hikes and issues of social security and retirement.

Öztiğ and Aras question why these mobilizations did not produce regime change as in some of the Middle Eastern cases. They highlight the strength and resilience of the authoritarian regimes. Moreover, to explain the regional (non)diffusion, they identify a negative externality from the Arab Spring revolutionary wave for the Caucasus and Central Asia context, in the form of information diffusion. To the extent that Arab uprisings underscored the transformative power of the social media and its instrumental role in political mobilization, they alerted the authoritarian rulers to prioritize the regime survival concerns and to take pre-emptive actions. The authoritarian learning process in the region consequently has limited the scope for democratic changes as it incentivized the regimes to increase repression, targeting not only the protestors but also media and the Internet freedom.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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