



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

Reports

A Balance of Power or a Balance of Threats in Turbulent Middle East?

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[From left to right]: Suzanne Maloney (Deputy Director, Foreign Policy Program, Brookings Institution), Khalid al Jaber (Gulf International Forum), Kadir Ustun, (Executive Director, SETA Foundation), Daniel Serwer, Director of SAIS Conflict Management Program, and Ross Harrison, Senior Fellow at Middle East Institute and professor at Georgetown University-at the podium) [AlJazeera]

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies (AJCS) and Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington hosted an international conference entitled, "Shaping a New Balance of Power in the Middle East: Regional Actors, Global Powers, and Middle East Strategy", on 12 June 2018. The one-day conference included several panels to address the dynamics of political geography in the Middle East, non-state actors and shadow politics, the sustainability of the balance of power, and the shifting roles of extra-regional powers. Participants are scholars, analysts and diplomats from the United States, the Gulf, Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey.

As a point of entry to the analysis of the current geo-political situation, the conference focused on how and why the Gulf and the Middle East are suffering a paroxysm of conflict involving virtually all the regional states as well as the United States, Russia and many different non-state actors. What dynamics are driving this chaos? What can be done to contain or reverse the damage? How might a new balance of power emerge?

Dr. Ezzeddine Abdelmoula, Manager of Research at Aljazeera Centre for Studies, was the Featured Speaker at the conference and delivered the following opening remarks:

Good morning everyone and thank you for coming and honoring us with your presence and participation in this conference. Thank you Dr. Serwer for your introduction. Let me in turn introduce my institution in a few words.

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies (AJCS) is the think tank and research leg of Al Jazeera Media Network. Established in just over a decade ago, this think tank has quickly moved up to position itself as one of the top 10 research institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. According to the Pennsylvania's Think Tanks and Civil Society index, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, has for the last four consecutive years been ranked number 5 over around 500 think tanks of the region. This year, in addition, it was ranked number one in the Gulf Cooperation Council region, which includes more than 60 think tanks. We also take pride in being the only Arab think-tank that figured on the Best Quality Assurance and Integrity Policies and Procedures List of the same index.

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies has more than a 100 published books on various topics of geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa. Thousands of analyses and research papers can be found and openly accessed on our website in both English and Arabic languages. Our flagship event is Al Jazeera Forum that takes place once every year, bringing together hundreds of academics, politicians and policy makers, from across the world, to debate and discuss various issues of regional and global politics.

Our partnerships and collaboration programs include a long list of respected and influential institutions. Among our partners is Cambridge University in the United Kingdom; we have just concluded a four-year research project on media in political transitions covering Tunisia, Morocco and Turkey. We organized joint conferences with the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMED) in Spain, the Sofia Forum in Bulgaria, the Institute of Peace Studies in Khartoum, just to mention a few.

Today, we are organizing this interesting event, here in Washington DC, at the Johns Hopkins University, together with our friends of the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), a well-respected institution for its academic and research successes in international relations and global studies.

I sincerely hope that the collaboration between AJCS and SAIS will grow as a promising formula of positive engagement among research institutions between the South and the North, or the East and the West. We live in a post-globalization world where not only our policy-making decisions, but also our personal lives are influenced by daily events and decisions taken thousands of miles away. As scholars, analysts, and opinion makers, we face similar challenges, and share the same desire for a better contribution in shaping enlightened and well-informed public policies either here or there. The stakes are high, and academia and think tanks are expected, now more than ever before, to help restore reason and moral politics.



[From Left to Right]: Anouar Boukhars (Carnegie and McDaniel College), Crispin Smith (Harvard Law School), Randa Slim (Middle East Institute and SAIS Foreign Policy Institute), and Daniel Serwer (SAIS Conflict Management Program), and Fatima Abo Alasrar (Arabia Foundation – at the podium) [AlJazeera]

Now, allow me, in the second part of this address, to say another few words about the topics of this conference.

The Dynamics of Political Geography in the Middle East

Why are we discussing the emergence of a new balance of power? Simply, because the old regional power system that we have known for the last 100 years, is not holding together any more. It has come to a state of almost complete redundancy and dysfunctionality. For the last several years, this collapsing system has been producing chaos, instability, terrorism and violent conflicts all over the Middle East. New geopolitical realities and dynamics deserve our careful attention as we try to make sense of this transition from a system that we are familiar with, to another system or systems that are still in the making.

Power and influence are no longer the monopoly of the traditionally big 'states' in that part of world. Indeed, power and influence are no longer the monopoly of states, with the phenomenal proliferation and growth of non-state actors. The traditional role of big states like Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, which used to be the leading powers in both the Mashreq and the Maghreb of the Arab world, has diminished considerably. Iraq continues to suffer multi-forms of violence, sectarian politics, terrorism and widespread corruption, especially since the invasion in 2003.

Egypt, which failed to transform its 2011 revolution to a democratic system and economic growth, and to invest in real power both hard and soft, has since turned inwardly, fighting terrorism within its borders, cracking down on political opposition and civil society groups, losing ground and influence to much smaller states in the region. Syria, for the last seven years, has become the battleground for various non-state actors, regional and global

powers alike. The regime struggles to retain its sovereignty and resume control over the vast territories it has lost to these competing powers. Algeria is in the waiting.

Saudi Arabia is leading fights both internally and externally, the outcomes, however, look uncertain on both fronts, to say the least. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which used to be an important vehicle for Saudi influence has, since the start of the Gulf crisis and the blockade of Qatar a year ago, entered into clinical death. On the other hand, emerging smaller states, such as the UAE and Qatar, are playing more important roles in the region and elsewhere. Their influence extends far beyond the limitation of their geography.

In North Africa, Tunisia, where I happen to come from, is another small state that played a crucial role in the current developments in the Arab world. It was the country where the Arab spring and all the hopes for change that came with it, originated. It may be a bit early to visualize, in the midst of this sweeping chaos, the real impact of the model of democratic politics that Tunisia is struggling to establish.

Regionally, the power of Iran and Turkey is growing steadily. Their presence and influence in almost all the conflicts of the Middle East are visible. The overlap and competition between the roles and interests of these two regional powers and those of global powers (the United States and Russia) is increasing and adding more complexity to the current realities.

Unlike the old regional system, that was primarily designed by foreign powers (here, I refer to France and Britain, and in particular, to the Sykes-Picot treaty), unlike that system which was designed in the absence of influential regional powers, any emerging system in the Middle East will have to take into account these new regional dynamics and geopolitical realities.

But, against the backdrop of these dynamics and realities, to what extent, do the current developments and shifts in the Middle East, between global powers and regional actors on the one hand, and between states and non-state actors, on the other hand, still conform to the assumptions of the 'balance of power' theory in International Relations.

This brings me to the last point of my speech:

The Balance of Power Theory

The concept of 'balance of power' is, as you know, central to the realist approach in international relations theory. It implies a rational objective of foreign policy among more than one player in a region, which is often characterized as vital for the strategic interests of global powers. As David Hume explains in his famous Essay "Balance of Power", the concept is as old as human history itself, and was often referred to, by both political

theorists and practical statesmen. However, the notion of balance of power should not be taken face value. Quincy Wright for instance argues that, "the predominance of the balance of power in the practice of statesmen for three centuries ... should not obscure the fact that throughout world history, periods dominated by the balance-of-power policies, have not been the rule."

With the current trend and frequency of crises and conflicts in the Middle East, the US-Arab relations are drifting toward some uncharted territories of polarization, fragmentation, and hegemonic impulses of certain regional actors. This reality seems to echo the concerns of the leading realist theorist Kenneth Waltz. In his essay "Globalization and American Power" published in 2000, he wrote, "the present condition of international politics is unnatural... Clearly something has changed."

Political realism, either classical or structural, defensive or offensive, seems to face new challenges. The growing role of non-state actors, which have mushroomed in the Middle East in the past two decades, has increasingly perplexed the international system as well as IR theorists. The counterterrorism paradigm struggles with numerous radical groups that have spread their ideologies from Algeria all the way through to Afghanistan. The question becomes more interesting: Are we confronted with a balance of power? Or, instead, a balance of threat?

As Stephan Walt has rightly pointed, the "balance-of-power theory is not wrong; it is merely incomplete. Power is one of the factors that affect the propensity to balance, although it is not the only one nor always the most important."

Back in December, he started his revealing essay "Who's Afraid of a Balance of Power?" with an interesting introduction, from which I read: "If you took an introduction to international relations course in college and the instructor never mentioned the "balance of power," please contact your alma mater for a refund."

Instead of asking why Russia and China are collaborating, or pondering what has brought Iran together with its various Middle East partners, they assume it is the result of shared authoritarianism, reflexive anti-Americanism, or some other form of ideological solidarity. This act of collective amnesia encourages U.S. leaders to act in ways that unwittingly push foes closer together, and to miss promising opportunities to drive them apart."

As the Russian strategy has gained more prominence in Syria and other parts of the region, President Trump's call for selective interventions, within his call for America's isolation from global crises, has raised questions about the U.S. real strategy vis-à-vis the reemerging bipolar system of international relations. Russian President Vladimir Putin has

argued, "Instead of establishing a new balance of power, the United States has taken steps that "threw the [international] system into sharp and deep imbalance."

This brings us to the core questions of this conference, which will be discussed over three panels: The current dynamics of political geography in the Middle East, the impact of non-state actors and shadow politics, and the sustainability of the balance of power, both in theory and in practice.



Ezzeddine Abdelmoula, Manager of Research at AlJazeera Centre for Studies, delivering the opening keynote speech at the

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