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## Reports

# Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective

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[Time]

The international conference “Shaping a New Balance of Power in the Middle East: Regional Actors, Global Powers, and Middle East Strategy”, co-hosted by Aljazeera Centre for Studies (AJCS) and John Hopkins University (JHU) in Washington earlier this summer, has triggered wider debate about the nature and the promise of an emerging balance of power in the region. New questions are raised about how a new balance can be different from the traditional U.S.-Soviet politics of bipolarity and rival proxies, the impact of new players, the power of militant groups and other non-state actors, and whether any emerging balance of power can be sustainable in the future. For instance, the Gulf and the Middle East are suffering a paroxysm of conflict involving virtually all the regional states as well as the US and 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?

As part of a special series “Shaping a New Balance of Power in the Middle East”, AJCS welcomes the insights of one of the panelists Professor Ross Harrison of Georgetown University. He traces the current power dynamics in the Middle East back to the onset of the Cold War and the simultaneous emergence of many of the Arab countries from the yoke of European colonialism into independence. As he illustrates in this paper, it was the collapse of the global Cold War system nearly four decades later that set the Middle East on its course for the future. The end of the Cold War set all states in the region, but particularly erstwhile Soviet allies, scrambling for new domestic legitimacy formulas and regional security frameworks. This and the period of American unipolarity that followed the end of the Cold War led to a regional power imbalance, which the Middle East is still contending with today.

While the end of the Cold War spawned a resistance front, consisting of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, against the United States and its regional allies, Harrison asserts it is also important to acknowledge that the conflict in the Middle East is more than just about revisionist and status quo powers. Another twist of the kaleidoscope reveals that because of the civil wars, the Middle East has morphed into a tripartite system, consisting of a struggle for power between Iranian, Arab and Turkish nationalisms.

The challenge for the future will be to reduce the incentives for revisionist versus status quo behavior. The opportunity is to instead reinforce the notion of joint stewardship of the regional system through regional cooperation and the creation of a regional security architecture. While this will prove a difficult road, it is the only viable path for leaders of the region to provide security and prosperity to their increasingly restive populations. This will also be the task for the international powers, which have an incentive to push in this direction, given the potential for disturbances in the Middle East to sow instability across the globe.

## Introduction

The Middle East has undergone several geopolitical transformations over the decades since World War II. While these in part were driven by political and economic realities indigenous to the region, the most profound changes have come about through the actions of outside actors, first by the Europeans and later by the United States and the Soviet Union.

Today the Middle East is enduring another transformation, perhaps the most consequential of this region's already fraught political history. Even though Russia and the United States are engaged in the region's hotspots, the metamorphous ongoing today is mostly driven by local and regional factors. The Arab Spring, the ensuing collapse of the Arab political order, and the ongoing civil wars, are the drivers of an emerging new Middle East political order. (1)

To get a sense of what is driving this metamorphous, and what trajectory this is likely to put the region on in the future, it is critical that we examine how the Middle East has evolved up to this point. The argument advanced here is that the most important historical factor to look at is how the end of the Cold War, and the ensuing era of American primacy, triggered a rebalancing of power in the region, giving birth to some of the problems we are contending with in the Middle East today.

It will also be argued that the most important current factor shaping the new Middle East are the ongoing civil wars, within which regional and international powers are contending. If we

are going to think about policy scenarios and strategies for moving the region from chaos to at least a modicum of stability, we need to understand both the historical dynamics that got us to where we are today, as well as the current factors that are helping shape the future.

## The Cold War in the Middle East

While the Cold War has been over for almost three decades, the legacy of this rivalrous period is still having an impact on the Middle East. The reason this period of superpower competition was so profound, and is now critical for understanding the region, is that its advent corresponded with the liberation of most Arab countries from the yoke of European colonialism. From the bookends of Syria and Lebanon gaining their sovereignty in 1946 to Algeria throwing off French rule in 1962, almost all former European colonial holdings became independent Arab states.

Each of these fledgling Arab countries had specific security, political and economic needs as they struggled to make the transition from colony to independent state. The omnipresent security threat for most Arab states was a fear of European colonial revanchism. There was also the perception that the creation of the state of Israel represented a form of neo-colonialism. Many of the states, particularly those without significant oil assets like Syria, faced economic challenges that they looked to outside powers to help alleviate.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union saw this emerging Arab landscape as fertile ground upon which to compete with the global ambitions of the other. Each of the superpowers competed for Arab allies in an effort gain the upper regional hand, thereby containing what they saw as the nefarious ambitions of their adversary.

It was the convergence of the needs of the newly independent Arab countries for outside support, and the available supply of that support from the United States and Soviet Union, that created the modern Middle East. Arab states, at their most vulnerable moment of transitioning from colonial vassals to independent states, sought and received support from the superpowers. Conservative monarchies, like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, fell squarely into the camp of the United States, risking their domestic legitimacy to ensure regime security. Syria, Libya, Iraq and Egypt (up until 1978), states whose legitimacy depended on the flouting of European and American norms, aligned themselves with the Soviet Union. (2) Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, initially in the 1950s tried to resist superpower entreaties and pursued a policy of non-alignment. But even he ultimately succumbed to the reality that this wasn't sustainable and aligned his country with the U.S.S.R. (3)

Non-Arab countries too figured into the Cold War equation, though they weren't as contested by the superpowers as the Arab states. Turkey, Iran and Israel all tacked towards the west, putting them squarely in the U.S. camp. (4) The result of this intersection between the advent of the Cold War and the security and economic needs of independent Arab states is that the region started to mimic the bipolar structure of the international system. Evidence of this was an Arab Cold War that mirrored the global superpower conflict. This divided the Arab world into two camps, with the Soviet backed, leftist leaning, Arab nationalist camp led by Egypt's Nasser pitted against the more conservative U.S. supported camp, consisting of Saudi Arabia and Jordan. (5)

What is most important about the Cold War period is that it engendered a Middle East political order that persisted from the 1940s until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. (6) It was the collapse of this order, and the ensuing dislocations this caused, which best helps us understand how changes in global geopolitics have contributed to the current power struggles we see in the Middle East today.

### The Collapse of the Cold War Regional Order

Political transitions from one era to another are always messy. The political order that was established during the Cold War started to fray even before the formal collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 1977 Egypt's President Anwar Sadat stunned the Arab world and the West by going to Jerusalem, forging a peace treaty with Israel in 1978, and upending a decades-long alliance with the Soviet Union, realigning Egypt squarely in the U.S. camp. In 1979, U.S. ally Iran underwent an Islamic revolution, which at its core repudiated the Shah's close alliance with the United States. And in 1990, as the Soviet Union was close to collapse, Iraq's Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, in effect testing the strength of the prevailing regional order. While these events put pressure on the Cold War regional order that had defined the Middle East since the end of World War II, it was the formal collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 that delivered the biggest geopolitical shock to the Middle East.

There were several effects of this momentous event that rocked the region. First, all countries aligned with either superpower took a strategic haircut. For the United States and the Soviet Union, alliances in the region were seen largely as instruments for battling and containing each other. When the Soviet Union collapsed, this strategic imperative ended for the United States. While the Middle East remained important to Washington given its reliance on oil and gas from the Persian Gulf and ties with Israel, the Cold War glue that held the United States

riveted to the region gave way. Two decades later, this provided the impetus to the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia". (7)

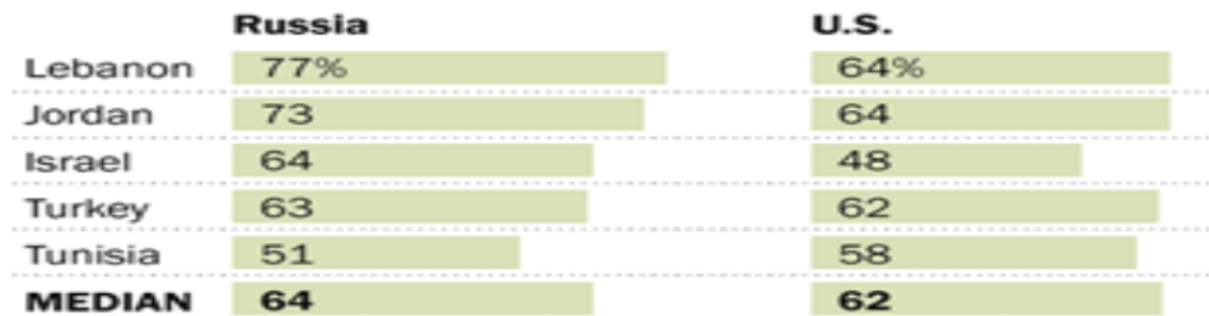
Second, former Soviet allies were left holding the bag. While all states were affected by the end of the Cold War, erstwhile Soviet allies like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen (South) had to reconfigure their economic and political social contracts, as well as their foreign policies. It is no mere coincidence that these are the countries that today are mired in civil war.

Syria, for example, tried to make the transition from a sprawling public sector to a private-sector oriented economy, partially because of the loss of Soviet economic aid. Because of the entrenched economic interests that had developed from the planned economy during the Cold War, Syria's transition to a more market-oriented approach wasn't as complete as those who saw Bashar Assad as a reformer would have liked. This along with the lack of liberalization of the political system contributed to the discontent that percolated through Syria in 2011, and ultimately plunged the country into civil war. (8)

In Yemen, the end of the Cold War coincided with the unity between North and South. While the Soviets began winding down their support for South Yemen (PDY) before the Cold War ended, Salim al-Bidh from South Yemen and Ali Abdullah Saleh from the North began discussing unification, which was consummated in 1990. According to Charles Dunbar, who had been the U.S. ambassador to Saana at the time, Moscow's changed attitudes towards Eastern Europe and elsewhere as the Cold War was winding down, translated into the leadership in the South feeling compelled to strike the best deal with the North as possible.(9) Equally profound was the effect the end of the Cold War had on the foreign policies of former Soviet allies. American allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, maintained their relationship with the only remaining superpower, retaining the security umbrella they derived from this relationship. Former Soviet allies lost their security umbrellas, and in the case of South Yemen, also its socialist identity.

## Many say U.S. and Russia are more influential today than 10 years ago

\_\_\_ plays a more important role in the Middle East today compared with 10 years ago



Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q59a-b.

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Also, the end of the Cold War upended the regional power balance. Since Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel during the 1967 war, it has tried to build enough leverage to negotiate a repatriation of this strategic territory. With the termination of the Cold War, the leverage Syria derived from its Soviet patron vis-à-vis Israel evaporated almost overnight. Moreover, Syria, Iraq and Libya, states which had positioned themselves during the Cold War as challengers to the regional status quo, lost the Soviet superpower engine that enabled that kind of a stance.

Each former Soviet ally dealt with this geopolitical shock of the lost Soviet patron in a different way. Libya, which under Qaddafi had the reputation as the “bad boy” of the Arab world, voluntarily renounced its nuclear weapons program, and quickly improved its relations with the United States. (10) Yemen, as stated before, unified. Iraq under Saddam Hussein saw opportunity, recklessly invading Kuwait, seemingly on the assumption that the United States would be less vigilant over the regional political order as the Cold War wound down. He seemed to get that message from his interaction with U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie, who right before the invasion, said that the United States had no opinion about Iraq’s escalating conflict with Kuwait. (11)



### Meeting between Ambassador April Glaspie and Saddam Hussein, July 25, 1990



Glaspie – Saddam

Syria's response to what was perceived as a threat posed by the loss of its Soviet patron was to reinforce its alliance with Iran, which had been forged years earlier in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, much to chagrin of its Arab brethren. This, in conjunction with Damascus's ties to Hezbollah in Lebanon, created a resistance front against what was perceived to be American hegemonic designs on the region, particularly after the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, in 2001 and 2003 respectively. (12)

This created a new power structure for the region, consisting of states like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, U.A.E. and Egypt, which tilted towards the United States, on one side, and a revisionist front on the other side, consisting of Iran and Syria along with non-state actors Hezbollah and Hamas, that have arrayed themselves to resist what they see as American designs on the Middle East. (13)

**Video: Professor Ross Harrison at the conference delivering his presentation on Panel 1: Dynamics of Political Geography in the Middle East**

<https://youtu.be/n9ciq1a8auY>

### American Unipolarity and a New Regional Order

At the end of the Cold War there were two phases of American unipolarity. The first was a period of "quiet unipolarity" during the Clinton administration in the 1990s. This is when the plans for NATO and EU expansion were hatched, and when the United States pursued a policy of dual containment towards Iraq and Iran, in effect imposing a Pax Americana on the Middle East in the absence of a global rival. (14) The United States only a couple years before had defeated Saddam Hussein in his bid to annex Kuwait. And Washington, seeing few constraints

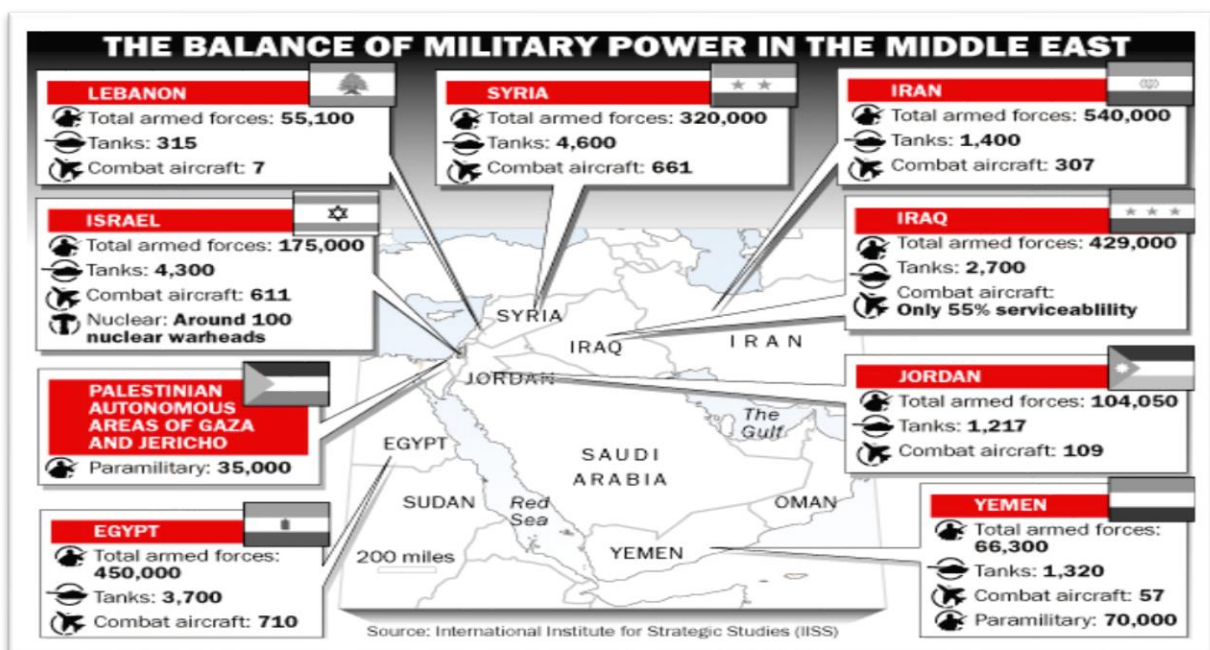


to its behavior in the Middle East, imposed tougher sanctions on Iran, labeling it a “rogue” state. (15)

The second phase was a more “aggressive unipolarity”, starting in the immediate wake of 9/11, when the United States brooked no active resistance by Middle Eastern regimes. This translated into military invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. (16) Iran initially saw its interests threatened by these incursions near its borders, but after the U.S. got bogged down militarily, it began to see an opportunity to build deterrence against possible U.S. and Israeli invasions. (17)

This provided the strategic impetus for Iran to strengthen the resistance front it led, with Syria and Hezbollah in tow. By developing asymmetric hybrid warfare means, augmented by Shi'i militias recruited from across the region, Iran developed the wherewithal to push back against what it saw as the arbitrary wielding of power by the United States. (18)

What unipolarity did was set up a new rivalrous power structure in the region. While during the Cold War, the Middle East reflected the bipolarity of the international system, what emerged following the Soviet collapse was much more an authentically regional system, defined by competing Iranian and Arab nationalisms and Sunni and Shi'i sectarian identities. Turkey up until the Syrian civil war was generally neutral in disputes between the Iranian led resistance front and U.S. Arab allies. But after it got mired in Syria, Ankara found its “zero problems with neighbors” neutral policy to be untenable. (19)



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## Civil War Vertical Contagion

This tripartite contest between Iranian, Arab and Turkish centers of power is today playing out in the civil wars of the Middle East. The civil wars in Yemen, Syria and Iraq turned what had been competition between coexisting regional powers into hotly contested proxy battles. These wars created security vacuums that Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey projected their power into.

Typically, involvement by Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the civil wars in the Middle East is thought of as a proxy phenomenon, where fighters on the government or rebel sides do the bidding of their respective external benefactors. But reducing regional power involvement in the civil wars to this proxy dynamic is misleading. In addition to the regional powers pushing themselves into the civil wars, they are pulled in by something this author has labeled “vertical contagion”. This means that conflicts do not just spread across borders horizontally to vulnerable neighboring states, but also vertically to stronger and larger regional powers. (20) There are two aspects of this vertical contagion phenomenon to consider. The first is how the compression of time, the fog of war, and “bad neighborhood effects” of the civil wars have drawn regional actors like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and now Israel, into the region’s civil wars. This is not to suggest that the fighting itself spreads to these regional powers, but rather that the political and economic effects of the fighting are exported. Case in point would be the Syrian civil war, where Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran have felt the effects of the conflict in the form of refugees, strengthened hardliners, terrorist attacks, and other threats to their interests, making staying on the sidelines untenable.

But the second aspect of vertical contagion is in many ways the most profound in terms of shifts in the balance of power. That is that the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya have morphed into a regional conflict among the major regional powers, where a vicious competition for short-term regional dominance completely overshadows longer-term shared interests of a stable and prosperous Middle East. (21) Whereas the country-level wars are about which elites govern the state, the regional civil war is about establishing a balance of power, or worse, which state asserts dominance over the broader Middle East. (22)

Another way of thinking about vertical contagion is that the country-level civil wars have turned this struggle for power within the regional order from a victimless rivalry into a

destructive competition which has lethal implications for the Middle East and the global order.

## Enter Moscow

Russia's foray into Syria in 2015 spelled the end of the American unipolar era. The truth is that the United States had already become a tentative power in the Middle East prior to Moscow's move, much to the dismay of Saudi Arabia and Israel. Spooked by the difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States started to retrench from the Middle East towards the end of the Bush Administration. In 2011, President Obama waded into Syria, but only tepidly, giving modest support to the rebels. When the U.S. did show resolve in Syria, it was mostly in the northeast part of the country, where with the help of the Kurds it battled ISIS. This left a vacuum in the main battle zones of the war in the western part of the country, which was filled by Russia in 2015 when it entered militarily to back Syria's President Assad.

A resurgent Russia has added a layer of complexity to the distribution of power in the Middle East. It has turned the region into a three-layered power system. The first layer is the battle for the state being fought between the rebels and government in the Syrian, Yemeni, Iraqi and Libyan civil wars. The second layer is the battle for regional dominance being waged between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. And the third is the competition between Washington and Moscow, in Syria and the broader region.

Russia's return to the Middle East was reminiscent of the Cold War era, in that there were again two great powers vying for influence in this tumultuous region. But by scratching beneath the surface, we see that this era in many ways is a clear departure from the past. First, unlike during the Cold War, the fulcrum of the Middle East today isn't the rivalry between the United States and Russia, but rather the regional contest between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, playing out in the region's civil wars. Second, the ideologies which serve as the sectarian fault-lines today aren't imported from the great powers, as they were during the Cold War, but rather are indigenous to the Middle East. Third, in contrast to the past, Russia and the United States have some common interests in the Middle East, such as regional stability, the stemming of refugee flows, successful counterterrorism efforts, among others. So, while this is a multi-layered system consisting of local, regional and international actors, it is far more complex than the Cold War system of the past. Now it is the regional piece which is the most important to solving the problems of the Middle East, something that international actors like the United States and Russia need to understand when devising policy. (23)

## Policy Implications

While the United States, due to its alliances and military footprint, remains an important actor in the Middle East, a discussion of what lies ahead in terms of power shifts should not be overly American-centric. There are several reasons for this. First, with the entry of Russia into Syria in 2015, Moscow muscled its way into being perhaps the most consequential external actor in the region. (24) Second, the United States under President Donald Trump has withdrawn support from the Syrian rebels and abdicated leadership in May of 2017 by breaking the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). These actions reinforced the view that the United States was an unreliable, arbitrary and impetuous actor in the region. For these reasons, any discussion of policy recommendations needs to also include Russia, China, and the European Union.

Policy discussions also need to incorporate an understanding that as shattered as the Middle East appears today, it is nevertheless an interconnected regional system, where changes that occur in one part can produce a disturbance elsewhere. While right now the system is dysfunctional and breeds instability, it is nonetheless a system of interdependence. Policymakers, who traditionally have viewed the region through country-specific lenses, need to broaden their view to think about policy from a regional vantage point, and how interdependence in the region can be shifted from conflict to cooperation.

When weighing policy options for creating more regional stability, a pressure point is the relationship between Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel. It is these countries that have the potential to help deescalate the civil wars, break the vertical contagion vortex, and end the mutual recriminations that add turmoil to an already tense region.

Russia has in fact been following a regional approach that focuses on these actors. This is enshrined in the Astana peace process, which Moscow co-sponsors with Turkey and Iran, in order to manage the conflict zones in Syria. While it is far from a perfect given the complexities on the ground, it has helped to de-escalate the conflict in some of the most fraught areas of Syria. Russia's recent attempts to broker an understanding between Iran and Israel on redlines for Syria is another example. (25)

Ideally, this model of working to forge cooperation among the regional powers should extend beyond Russia and Syria to the broader region and international community, to break the

spell of vertical contagion. One pathway would be for the global powers to work with the regional powers on a security architecture for the Middle East that would work towards bringing the civil wars to an end, prevent a return to hostilities once the fighting stops, and provide mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution. (26)

Skeptics would argue that given the degree of animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is implausible that the current venomous relationship between these regional powers can be reversed. But there are two reasons why this isn't completely unrealistic. First, the region is highly sensitive to cues from the international environment. While there is no guarantee that a concerted effort by international powers would bring the regional powers together, global forums in the past have brought warring parties together. The United States and Soviet Union co-sponsored the Madrid conference in 1991, which did set in motion negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). And while the negotiation of the JCPOA Iran nuclear deal didn't have wide support in the region, it did show the capacity for the international powers to work in concert on behalf of an issue that affected the stability of the Middle East.

Second, the disputes between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Israel and Iran, aren't over territory. Instead they center on the regional behaviors of these countries and the motivations behind them. While in some ways this makes resolution more difficult, as disputes aren't rooted in concrete grievances, it also makes them easier to resolve. Agreements wouldn't require states to give up land, something leaders are normally politically loath to do.

Third, despite the current vitriol and acrimony, there are shared interests among the regional powers. Without regional stability, no state can maximize their long-term economic prosperity and political security. The fact that immediate threats overshadow longer-term common interests doesn't mean that they don't exist.

Those still not convinced about the prospects or advisability of pursuing regional cooperation might suggest that offshore balancing is the best way to ensure regional security. (27) The idea is that external actors weigh in on a lopsided regional competition on the side of the disadvantaged party, with the goal of restoring the region to a healthy balance of power. In a way, that is what the Trump administration is doing by siding with Saudi Arabia and Israel in their struggle against what they see as a rising Iran.

But, there are two problems with this approach. The first is both Saudi Arabia and Israel already enjoy conventional military superiority over Iran, even without further “balancing” by the United States. Iran’s advantages in the region do not stem from its conventional capabilities, but rather are rooted in its unconventional hybrid warfare capabilities. (28) Iran’s unique capabilities are perfectly suited for projecting influence into fragile states like Syria, Iraq and Yemen, currently the soft underbelly of the Arab world. In other words, current regional conditions play to Iran’s strengths and to Saudi weaknesses. Offshore balancing, instead of hurting Iran would likely give it incentives to further hunker down in the civil war zones of the Middle East, further weakening the Saudi and Israeli positions, and potentially reinforcing a cycle of violence.

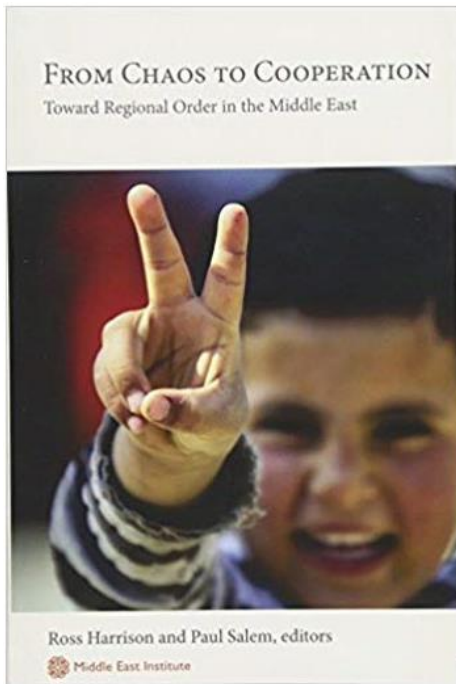
Second, offshore balancing assumes that there is no rival power willing to ratchet up support for the other side of the regional power equation. If Iran feels under siege from the United States, as it does today, it can turn to Russia, China and perhaps even the European Union for support. This ratcheting up effect can lead to an escalation of the conflict, rather than stabilization, undermining the purpose of off-shore balancing.

## Conclusion

The current power dynamics in the Middle East can be linked back to the onset of the Cold War and the simultaneous emergence of many of the Arab countries from the yoke of European colonialism into independence. And it was the collapse of the global Cold War system nearly four decades later that set the Middle East on its course for the future. The end of the Cold War set all states in the region, but particularly erstwhile Soviet allies, scrambling for new domestic legitimacy formulas and regional security frameworks. This and the period of American unipolarity that followed the end of the Cold War led to a regional power imbalance, which the Middle East is still contending with today.

While the end of the Cold War spawned a resistance front, consisting of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, against the United States and its regional allies, it is also important to acknowledge that the conflict in the Middle East is more than just about revisionist and status quo powers. Another twist of the kaleidoscope reveals that because of the civil wars, the Middle East has morphed into a tripartite system, consisting of a struggle for power between Iranian, Arab and Turkish nationalisms.





**Harrison's book**

The challenge for the future will be to reduce the incentives for revisionist versus status quo behavior. The opportunity is to instead reinforce the notion of joint stewardship of the regional system through regional cooperation and the creation of a regional security architecture. While this will prove a difficult road, it is the only viable path for leaders of the region to provide security and prosperity to their increasingly restive populations. This will also be the task for the international powers, which have an incentive to push in this direction, given the potential for disturbances in the Middle East to sow instability across the globe.

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