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Letter From the Editors



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Greetings from the editors of *MENA Politics*, the newsletter of the APSA Middle East and North African Politics Section.

We are thrilled to present the first issue of our newsletter as the incoming editorial team. This marks the beginning of an exciting journey for us, and we are eager to continue the legacy of excellence established by our predecessors.

First and foremost, we extend our heartfelt thanks to the outgoing editorial team, Nermin Allam, Gamze Cavdar, and Sean Yom, for their dedication and hard work. Their efforts have set a high standard, and we are committed to maintaining and building upon this foundation.

In our editorial term, we aim to publish work from a diverse group of scholars, featuring varied perspectives, methodologies, and substantive research topics. As with the last editorial team, the newsletter will highlight recent and ongoing research from our colleagues, while also providing space for less formal reflections on contemporary developments shaping our work as scholars, educators, and observers of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Given the challenging and profoundly concerning context in the US, where freedom of speech and academic freedoms are under attack, it is more important than

ever to voice our concerns as political scientists specializing in the Middle East while supporting and amplifying the voices of scholars and students who contribute to the richness of our academic community.

Middle East politics is undoubtedly at the center of such attacks, which have already impacted many universities across the country. The current US administration has deemed views critical of Israel or supportive of Palestinian rights to be antisemitic, pro-Hamas, and/or a threat to national security. The US State Department has reportedly begun scouring the social media profiles of visa applicants, including students and scholars, with the goal of denying visas to those who have expressed similar views (Wong, 2025). Hundreds of noncitizens, mainly students but also some scholars, suspected of expressing such views have had their visas revoked and/or been detained, with the intention of deporting them from the country. Some have apparently been targeted for their speech and expression, while others have been identified based on other pretexts, such as minor traffic violations (Gary and Gluckman 2025). At the end of April, following numerous legal challenges, Trump administration lawyers disclosed that many would see their visas temporarily restored (Florido 2025). However, it seems

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likely that the administration will continue to pursue the removal and deportation of international students and scholars under an updated policy.

Self-censorship among political scientists specializing in the Middle East has already become the new norm (Lynch and Telhami, 2025). And many universities, including some of the most prominent and wealthy institutions in the country, have so far been unwilling or afraid to vigorously defend principles of free speech and expression when it comes to questions about the Middle East. Such attacks, perhaps especially on scholars who study Middle East politics, are only likely to increase in the future.

However, regional developments require our continued attention and analysis. And in this issue, we explore three main topics: the possibility of a new regional order, the politics of time, and the Biden administration's legacy in the region.

We explore the first topic in a feature essay and a symposium. We asked our contributors if there was a new regional order in the making in the aftermath of October 7, 2023. In her feature essay, Louise Fawcett cautions against assuming a brand-new order has emerged, highlighting historical precedents and the enduring entanglement of regional and global dynamics. While the Gaza War has brought changes, many current trends have long roots, and the definitions of “order” and “Middle East” are contested.

Our first symposium, co-edited by Sebnem Gumuscu and Samer Shehata, on the same theme brings together contributions by Shahrām Akbarzadeh, Pınar Bilgin, May Darwich,

Karim Makdisi, Ewan Stein, and Adham Saouli. Akbarzadeh argues that US support for Israel has damaged America's regional image and fueled a desire for security diversification and self-sufficiency among Arab states. China has capitalized on perceived US disengagement, and Arab states are increasingly engaging diplomatically with Iran.

Saouli contends that the Gaza War is a critical juncture, potentially leading to US hegemony due to the weakening of the “Resistance Axis.” However, unresolved issues like the Arab-Israeli conflict and Israeli ambitions may generate resistance and instability, potentially pitting the US and Israel against their regional allies.

Bilgin argues that the regional response post-October 7 is not fundamentally new but rather a continuation of trends established by the Gulf War, Oslo Accords, and Abraham Accords, marked by an abdication of Arab states' collective responsibility towards Palestinians and increasing complicity with Israel.

Makdisi compares current efforts at regional reordering to those during the 2001 US “war on terror” and the “counter-revolution” following the Arab uprisings. He argues that the current attempt, driven by the Greater Israel project, normalization agreements, and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, is happening amid a shift from a liberal international order to one based on “the legitimacy of unrestrained force.” However, these efforts will not be without their challenges, including popular support for the Palestinians, local resistance, and Turkish ambitions.

Darwich highlights how Israel's wars have exposed the vulnerabilities of Arab regimes and

Letter from the Editors (continued)

elevated the role of resilient non-state actors like Hamas and the Houthis, who have gained popularity by challenging Israel and positioning themselves as defenders of Palestinian rights, contrasting sharply with the often-muted response of Arab governments.

Stein suggests that while Iran's "Axis of Resistance" has been weakened, Israel's maximalist agenda, supported by the US, could foster a fragile unity among Arab states, Turkey, and Iran against them. This unity would be based on a lack of better alternatives, and the future regional order remains uncertain.

In a closely related roundtable, Hamad Al-bloshi, Waleed Hazbun, Curtis Ryan, and Samer Shehata reflect on the Biden administration's legacy in the Middle East. Several themes raised in the symposium also appear in these assessments, with all the authors critical of an administration that left the region seemingly more violent and unstable than when it first entered office.

Our second symposium, co-edited by Diana Greenwald and Rola El-Husseini, delves into "the politics of time" in the MENA region. Contributors consider whether and how time shapes politics – i.e. through the effects of age, time period, or generational membership – and how politicians, in turn, attempt to shape and manipulate time. This symposium – summarized in the introduction from Greenwald and El-Husseini – includes contributions from Adam Almqvist, Tamirace Fakhoury, Selin Bengi Gümrükçü, Ameni Mehrez, David Patel, and Sarah Anne Rennick.

We hope these articles provide valuable insights and stimulate thoughtful discussions. We welcome your suggestions and feedback. Please contact us with your ideas for future issues.

-Diana B. Greenwald, Sebnem Gumuscu, and
Samer Shehata

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News from the APSA MENA Section

Dear Colleagues,

I hope you are planning on joining us at APSA 2025 in Vancouver, Canada, on September 11-14. Our section program co-chairs, Janine Clark and Nermin Allam, have assembled a superb program, including 14 panels and a poster session. These will cover a wide range of topics including social movements, gender politics, migration and citizenship, public opinion, state-society relations, foreign policy, international relations, authoritarianism, and democratic backsliding. Assembling such a diverse program is a ton of work, so I want to thank Janine and Nermin for all their labor on this. It is an excellent program, and we hope you can join us in Vancouver.

We will also have a business meeting at APSA, which will include our section awards for best book, article, dissertation, and conference paper. Thanks to all twelve of our committee members, who are currently at work reading through all the submitted materials. That, too, takes a great deal of time and effort, so thank you, Youssef El-Chazli, Summer Forester, Jasmine Gani, Lisel Hintz, Sharan Grewal, Dana El-Kurd, Pete Moore, Neil Ketchley, Elizabeth Parker-Magyar, Wendy Pearlman, Jillian Schwedler, and Morten Valbjorn.

At the APSA meeting, we are planning once again to hold a joint reception with our colleagues from the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) and APSA MENA Workshops. So, thanks to Dana El-Issa, Andrew Stinson, and Marc Lynch for helping us make this a success (and by far the most popular event at APSA) every year.

Our section is also joining with APSA MENA Workshops to host a Research Development Group (RDG) for early-career Arab scholars, especially those from the Middle East. Participants will be workshopping article-length projects with more senior scholars to bring these articles toward publication. We will hold the RDG at APSA on the day before the full conference begins. You can find the announcement and details on our section website <https://apsamena.org/> or at <https://web.apsanet.org/mena/>

Within our section of APSA, our executive committee and leadership team this year includes Sarah El-Kazaz (who has organized all our committees), Nermin Allam (who maintains and updates our website), Lama Mourad (who runs our social media on Bluesky), and Zahra Babar (who, as treasurer, is keeping us solvent, and managing our limited funds). The terms of three of the five of us will come to an end at APSA 2025. So, we will have elections via online balloting in the summer to replace these three positions: chair, treasurer, and secretary / at-large member. I will be in touch via APSA-connect and on our website and Bluesky about the nomination and electoral processes.

Finally, it seems that every time I write a section update, the situation around us has gotten worse. As you may recall, at the APSA 2024 meeting in Philadelphia, I asked APSA to make a statement defending academic freedom in light of all the difficulties we are facing on our various campuses, in terms of being able simply to speak up, much less to sit

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News from the APSA MENA Section (continued)

in or protest. That situation is now, of course, even worse, as the Trump administration has imposed budget cuts and aid freezes, revoked visas, and has also engaged in arrests, detentions, and even deportations. International students and faculty are particularly vulnerable, as are contingent faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates. But in truth, we are all vulnerable, and the relative silence from APSA has, so far, been deafening. As a specialist on the Middle East, you may, however, have noticed the active role that the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) has been playing in addressing this clear moment of crisis, especially on campuses across the U.S., but with implications far beyond these settings. As educators, scholars, and simply as human beings, we are all living through severe crises in the region as well as on many of our campuses. I have asked, and will continue to ask, APSA to step up and do more. In the meantime, I would prefer to wish you academic, scholarly, and pedagogical success this semester and next. And I do. But more importantly, I wish you good health and safety as we are all weathering these seemingly unrelenting crises.

With respect,

Curtis Ryan
APSA MENA Section Chair

News from the APSA MENA Program

The American Political Science Association's [MENA Program](#) is a multi-year effort to support political science research and networking among early-career scholars across the Middle East and North Africa. Through a series of workshops, departmental collaborations, research grants, and other opportunities, the program extends APSA's engagement with the international political science community and strengthens research networks linking American scholars with colleagues overseas. The goal of APSA's MENA Workshops, generously funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York through 2025, is to enhance the capacities and resources of political scientists in the Arab MENA region, while also providing a forum for supporting their ongoing research.

Last fall, APSA supported the American University in Cairo (AUC) in launching a series of research forums to promote scholarly exchange between AUC's Political Science Department and the Faculty of Economics and Political Science (FEPS) at Cairo University. This collaboration is part of APSA's MENA Departmental Collaboration Initiative through which APSA partners with political science and related departments at universities in the Arab world to design tailored programming that supports local faculty and graduate students. The AUC-FEPS Research Forums, held twice per semester at AUC, will run from October 2024 to September 2026, totaling four forums per year. These scholarly exchanges provide a platform for faculty and graduate students to present research, engage in critical discussions, and strengthen academic networks.

In December 2024, APSA held its [11th annual MENA Research Development Workshop](#) in partnership with the Center for the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies at Kuwait University (KU). The one-week in-person workshop, titled "The Politics of Identity in the Middle East and North Africa" convened 21 PhD candidates and early-career scholars. Led by Drs. Hamad Albloshi (Kuwait University), Sarah Almutairi (Kuwait University), Lisa Blaydes (Stanford University), and Daniel L. Tavana (Penn State University), the workshop examined the theme of identity

politics in the region and supported fellows in refining their research manuscripts and situating their contributions within broader academic debates. The program included feedback-focused panels, thematic seminars, and professional development sessions, featuring guest scholars from both Kuwait and international universities. Discussions covered a wide range of topics, including gender identity and survey research, religion and national belonging, and ethnic and tribal identities in electoral politics.

This summer, the third MENA methods training workshop for early-career scholars will be held from August 16-20 in Amman, Jordan. The workshop will focus on addressing issues of decolonization and extractivism in academic research on the MENA region. Led by Drs. Rola El-Husseini (Lund University), Sarah Anne Rennick (Arab Reform Initiative, Paris), Nadine Sika (American University in Cairo), and Saloua Zerhouni (Mohammed V University), the program seeks to gather insights from diverse social positionalities to enhance awareness and sensitivity to extractive knowledge practices in the region, while also encouraging early-career scholars to reflect upon their own positionalities and how these influence knowledge production about the MENA region in western academia. This workshop will mark the third methods training following the launch of the

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News from the APSA MENA Program (continued)

[MENA Methods Program Initiative](#) in 2023.

APSA will hold a Research Development Group (RDG) for a set of early-career MENA scholars attending the [2025 APSA Annual Meeting](#) in Vancouver, Canada. Organized in partnership with the MENA Politics Section, the RDG offers scholars an opportunity to advance their research manuscripts for publication, participate in the annual meeting, and develop scholarly networks with colleagues. Selected participants will attend the full-day seminar on Wednesday, September 10, to discuss and receive critical feedback on an article-length manuscript in progress.

As part of our partnership with the [Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research](#) (IQMR) at Syracuse University and the [Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research](#) (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan, APSA will sponsor seven scholars from Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Palestine to attend the 2025 Summer Programs in the US. The partnerships aim to expand support for MENA-based scholars by providing advanced methodology training at premiere U.S. institutions.

For more information about the APSA MENA Program, visit the project website: <http://web.apsanet.org/mena/> or contact menaworkshop@apsanet.org.

APSA MENA Project Team
American Political Science Association

News from the Arab Political Science Network

The Arab Political Science Network is a collaborative scholarly initiative that seeks to support Arab political scientists.

Greetings to all!

While we hoped the ceasefire that went into effect earlier in the year would last, we are back again to daily horrific attacks in Palestine and sporadic outbreaks in Lebanon and Syria. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 has already had knock-on effects on social, economic and political aspects beyond the United States and threatens to engulf the world in new forms of competitive authoritarianism.

The Arab Political Science Network ([APSN](#)) remains committed to supporting, as much as we can, everyone within our communities – students, educators, researchers, and scholars – who are directly and indirectly affected by the ongoing daily assaults and tragic losses. Nonetheless, we believe in and support academic freedoms in the region and beyond, while unequivocally condemning all dehumanizing language, bigotry, and silencing.

APSN started 2025 with a seminar series titled Politics and War in MENA, in collaboration with [CEDEJ](#) and the [Middle East Studies program](#) at AUC. The series runs monthly in English and Arabic from January to May and ends with an in-person workshop on June 24-25 in Cairo, Egypt. The themes of the series include War and State (de)Formation, War and the Economy, War and Media Disinformation among others. Our final session in the series, *Everyday Life and War*, will take place via zoom on [May 19](#). You can find more information about the series, speakers and watch the videos of the previous sessions [here](#).

In the wake of the astonishing collapse of the Assad regime last December, Syria and the Syrian people have entered a transition process that will be mired with a myriad of urgent political, economic, social and legal questions. These questions and more will be influenced by a host of domestic and regional / international players. As such, APSN in collaboration with the Arab Reform Initiative ([ARI](#)) will launch a series of webinars focusing on Syria in Comparative Transition. The first session is scheduled for May 5. Check the APSN website and social media for more information about the recordings and upcoming sessions.

As part of our commitment to engage with the social and political science communities, APSN is organizing a panel at the [biennial conference](#) of the Arab Council for the Social Science (ACSS) in May 15-18 in Beirut, Lebanon, and a roundtable at the [APSA Annual Meeting](#) in September 11-14 in Vancouver, Canada. If you are attending either conferences, please stop by our sessions, which will be announced soon. In addition, APSN launched two bi-weekly Arabic newsletters that aims to increase Arabic language outputs and knowledge sharing. The first is [ad-Dal](#) that recommends new non-fiction / social science Arabic and English books, and the second is [az-Zad](#) that provides Arabic language abstracts for social science academic journals. These newsletters complement the Arabic book review portal [al-Salon](#), which focuses on providing Arab reviews for non-fiction books about the MENA region that are also available in audio format.

News from the Arab Political Science Network (cont.)

Finally, we invite all to follow us on social media and sign up for our newsletters to receive the latest information and opportunities that we offer. Please reach out to us at info@arabpsn.org with any questions, suggestions, and ideas for collaborations.

Best to all!

Ahmed Morsy (on behalf of the APSN team)

"New" Regional Order in the Middle East: plus ça change?¹

Louise Fawcett



Louise Fawcett is a Professor of International Relations and Fellow of St. Catherine's College at the University of Oxford. She chairs the International Advisory Board of the UN Centre for Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) in Belgium; she also serves on the Academic Advisory Board of German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg.

Throughout the Western world, media outlets and think tanks resonate with predictions of a new international order, or alternatively a new world “disorder”. We are told how the fast-changing geopolitical terrain with its new balance of power, both material and normative, is fast eroding the old “rules based” or “liberal international order”. The context may be different today, but the language recalls that of the “coming anarchy” predicted by Robert Kaplan in 1994. Much of this analysis rests upon an understanding of a decline of US power and legitimacy, a weakening of international institutions designed and dominated by Western powers, and the “rise” of alternative centers of power comprising states, competing institutions, and actors with different perceptions of order and the mechanisms underpinning it. For some, these changes present a welcome opportunity for a global reset; for others they are a source of fear and uncertainty.

The Middle East is close to the heart of such discussions. If a new world order is indeed emerging, the Middle East is part of that transformation. It is a geopolitically significant region that has itself experienced partic-

ularly rapid changes over the past few decades, including those brought sharply into relief since the onset of the Gaza War, which started in response to the Hamas attacks on Israel in October 2023. That war and its outcome, which has reduced the immediate threat from Israel’s principal enemies, notably the Resistance Axis (Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and Shi’ite groups in Yemen and Syria) and contributed to the fall of the Syrian regime, has revised assumptions about the shifting regional power balance. It has strengthened the negotiating position of core states like Turkey and Egypt, while reaffirming the authority of those Arab Gulf states, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whose influence on regional order has been growing steadily over recent decades. Indeed, beyond Gaza and its ongoing fallout, the region has been fast transforming in terms of its capabilities and distribution of power which has seen the rise and fall of different states (notably those most affected by the Arab Uprisings), and by a far more assertive response to global questions than characterised the Cold War or immediate post-Cold War period, where the shadow of the Western world predominated in regional affairs. Regional states have greater agency: they are revisionist powers, part of a rising

¹ This essays draws on Fawcett 2025 forthcoming.

Global South, who no longer readily cede to former allies, and choose from a large menu of alliance partners. The Saudi hosting of the recent Russia-US talks on Ukraine (or China's previous hosting of the Saudi-Iran talks) is an example of its global reach. Perhaps the same could be said of other world regions – that they are experiencing high levels of change as part of a larger global reset - but the difference in the Middle East is the deeply entangled relationship between regional and global order.

This regional-global entanglement is no new phenomenon. The interdependence between Middle Eastern and global order is demonstrated time and again across its turbulent history since interdependence, whether through its enduring geopolitical significance – drawing on Mackinder's (1904) "Heartland" theory, or its economic weight – notably where vital energy resources like oil and gas are concerned. Despite global efforts to reduce fossil fuel dependence, the latter remains hugely important, more so following the Ukraine War, and the sanctions regime imposed on Russia, giving Middle East oil states – not for the first time - an important bargaining chip. It has been described as the "most penetrated" subsystem (Brown 1984), revealing how external powers have repeatedly intervened to promote their own regional interests and contrasting visions of regional order, making the regional and global dimensions hard to separate. This penetration dates from the late Ottoman period, through to the establishment of independent states under colonial tutelage, early Cold War competition for allies, and multiple post-Cold War conflicts right to the present. Middle East wars have been regularly "globalized", spilling over their borders and drawing in an array of external powers and institutions, thereby impacting the international security architec-

ture. The current conflict in Gaza, which has engaged and divided world opinion, is a case in point, but there are many more, including the longer history of the Arab-Israel conflict, the Lebanese Civil War, the Iranian Revolution, the Iraq War, or the events around the Arab Uprisings, which saw extensive meddling by non-regional states, most notably in Libya and Syria. If world order is changing the Middle East is at the center, even a bellwether of such changes - a "laboratory of contemporary world politics" (Brownlee and Ghiabi 2025, xxvi).

Beyond the unfolding drama of the latest confrontation between Hamas and Israel, however, how robust are claims of a brand "new" Middle Eastern order, and does the current conjuncture really qualify as a turning point or "critical juncture" (Pierson 2004, 10) as some claim? At one level, events on the ground are changing fast, making robust predictions hard. At another, the conflict in Gaza which has returned the "Question of Palestine" back to center stage, arguably builds on events since at least the start of the twenty-first century, if not before. These include the "War on Terror" that followed 9/11; the Iraq War; the Arab Uprisings and their multiple consequences, all of which set in train processes that radically reshaped the regional balance of power away from a core of republican states (some of whose regimes were victims of the Arab Uprisings) and towards the monarchies of the Arab Gulf, Israel, Turkey, and Iran. Iran's empowerment, for example, owed much to the effects of the Iraq War, just as its new vulnerability may be attributed to the effects of the Gaza and Ukraine Wars on its key allies.

This essay critically reprises Middle East "order" and its meanings, and its interdependent relationship with global order over time. The

following section scrutinizes these much-used (or abused) terms and their appropriateness. What do we mean by order, who defines it, and for which purpose; what is the Middle East today - the provocative title of a new book by Marc Lynch (2025); and how relevant is the traditional description of the region in thinking about possible orders, when the region has evidently broken away from its post-colonial moorings? A final section reviews the history of some past “reordering” moments and locates recent developments in the region within these, sorting out the new from the old. It argues that many of the features today described as new have long roots; that new Middle East orders have been regularly predicted but not always emerged, at least not in the anticipated form. Remember when US President George H.W. Bush promised a “New World Order” (Bush 1991), one with a Middle East peace settlement at its heart? By looking at those histories and reprising the state of the region today in the light of changes that have occurred since the start of this century, it proposes a more balanced, decentred view of order, placing Middle East change in context and within a wider framework of changing global order.

What is order and what is the Middle East?

What do we mean when we talk about “order” and “Middle East” order? On international order, as International Relations (IR) scholars explain, we search for some predictable and durable patterns in relations between states via a balance of power mechanism or shared norms and institutions, the latter providing evidence of an “international society” (Hurrell 2007). An order, like the Cold War bipolar order, was a power balancing arrangement; the scope for multilateral collaboration was narrowed, though still ex-

istent – in arms control treaties, for example. The post-Cold War “unipolar” order, for a brief period at least, offered the promise of a far more ambitious global template for order around the twin projects of economic and political liberalization. But that order was short and never fully realized. Both these two orders look unfamiliar today, despite predictions of a “new Cold War” between the US and China and elements of unipolarity in the transactional, “America first” approach of the US President Trump. International order looks messier, more fragmented, less predictable, and engages a much larger range of actors in what many describe as a “multipolar” world.

The same holds for Middle East order. In fact, when it comes to the Middle East, one immediate observation might be that ordering patterns have always been more elusive, and elements of an international society hard to locate. The Middle East did not escape the effects of the Cold War; it engaged with the effects of globalization but also obeyed its own internal dynamics and logics. Indeed, “disorder” appears to be a more appropriate term to describe much of its history (Maloney 2025). These arguments have foundations but draw upon essentializing notions of the region as being beyond order or condemned to perpetual anarchy – a popular post-Arab Spring refrain, accompanied by predictions of the downfall of the “artificial” Arab State (Ahram and Lust, 2016). As discussed below, they rely upon a particular interpretation of order and the Middle East itself: by searching for order only “where the light shines” as Lisa Anderson (2006) claimed in reference to efforts to study Middle East democratization using Western political science methods. They similarly neglect or ignore periods of relative stability in relations between Arab and non-Arab states – for

example when Arab republican states after independence upheld a consensus around anti-colonialism, Arab norms, and hostility to Israel. And how, at different points in the region's recent history, putative new orders have emerged – post-Iranian revolution, for example, when Arab states (and their Western allies) sought to balance the Iran threat; in the 1990s; during the Middle East Peace Process with its promise of a comprehensive new regional order; or after the Iraq War, when a fragile and still tentative regional architecture emerged around two loose alliance systems, notably the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance” and a bloc of more “moderate”, US aligned Arab regimes. The latter system, with some adjustments, was further reinforced by the effects of the Arab Uprisings (Fawcett 2023), and remains in place today, even as Iran's allies have been seriously weakened by Israel's campaigns against Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis. Despite ruptures and fragmentation, order is not absent in the Middle East, and there are significant continuities across orders. However, measured by the standards of durability, predictability, and institutional stickiness in inter-state relations as defined by IR scholars, the Middle East falls short; it is characterized by an absence of regularised ordering patterns and weak institutions, making it harder to pinpoint critical points in the creation of new orders.

Tracking orders historically and identifying new ordering moments and their legacies is one way to avoid simplifying notions about “new orders.” The issue is compounded by the unit of analysis used: the Middle East. Is the Middle East region as often conceived – the 22 members of the League of Arab States plus Iran, Israel, and Turkey – really an appropriate one in terms of looking for predictable ordering patterns? Are we asking the right questions and looking in the right places,

as Anderson (2006) suggests? This colonial or post-colonial regional framing is not one easily associated with coherent ordering patterns, given its criss-crossing sub-regional and transregional dynamics. Critical scholars, like Pinar Bilgin (2019), have suggested alternative formulations which could work better in terms of trying to find regular ordering features in the Middle East – an Islamic Middle East, an Arab, or Mediterranean Middle East, for example, rather than relying on maps designed by colonial powers. Yet even these alternative designations arguably fail to capture the degree of fluidity and mobility of the contemporary region, characterized by multiple criss-crossing alliances (Del Sarto and Soler i Lecha 2024; Darwich 2021). The “Middle East” has burst out of its post-colonial boundaries and reaches into Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian Ocean, and beyond (Fawcett 2023; Lynch 2022). Looking at its emerging alliance patterns and behaviors reveals how this is no longer the Middle East once imagined by the West (Bilgin 2019). Hence, neither familiar concepts of “order” nor the “Middle East” offer a particularly useful set of tools to appraise the contemporary Middle East, reminding us how IR theories and (post)imperial geographies, or “geo-epistemologies”, continue to restrict rather than promote understanding (Barkawi et al. 2024).

New orders, past and present

Against this framing, let us briefly consider some prior ordering moments in Middle East history and place them in context. It is supposed that the Gaza War and the success of Israel's campaigns, leading to significant reductions in the material capacity of its principal enemies, notably the Resistance Axis, and the linked demise of the Assad regime, have created the possibilities of a “New Order,”

one still reliant on US power and supported by regional brokers like the Arab Gulf States and Turkey. Underlying that order are also the earlier backchannel negotiations between Israel and certain Arab states - that built on previous peace agreements with first Egypt and then Jordan - and culminated in the 2020 Abraham Accords. The Trump administration has reaffirmed President Biden's "iron-clad" support for Israel; his alignment with Gulf Arab states continues, though they disagree with his extravagant Gaza plans.

Any notion of a brand-new order, however appealing, needs qualifying. It recalls recent and recurring debates about new orders. Soon after US President Bush outlined his "New World Order" after the 1991 Gulf War (Bush 1991), Israel's Shimon Peres also spoke of a "New Middle East" following the Oslo Accords in 1993. Though the Oslo Accords are remembered with some nostalgia today, they failed (Shlaim 2019). The failure of that order was underlined by the killing of one of the Oslo architects and the escalation in terrorist attacks against mostly Western targets, of which 9/11 was the most dramatic example. The Afghan War and the Iraq War were both results of the War on Terror and the perceived need to contain "rogue" states. It is easy to forget how, in the febrile environment of the early 2000s, and with the Palestine question effectively side-lined, another new regional order was promised, the result of another bold US attempt to reshape the region via state rebuilding in Iraq. Indeed, Iraq was to become a model state for that new regional order. The Iraq War failed disastrously, however, unleashing a series of destructive events whose consequences for the region are still unfolding. Entangled among those were the Arab Uprisings, not in their origins, but in the unleashing of jihadi movements and sectarian divides whose effects continue to re-

verberate – leading to the weakening or near collapse of certain Arab states and strengthening of others. In the post-2011 period, the region experienced levels of disruption hardly matched in its history as previously "strong states", like Egypt, witnessed domestic protest, regime change, or rupture as competing groups and external powers sought control.

No sooner had some of the effects of the Arab Uprisings started to subside, with some new patterns and relationships pointing to a tentative new order or balance of power around the two principal regional adversaries and their allies (Israel and Iran), than the Hamas attacks on Israel, followed swiftly and decisively by the overwhelming power and reach of Israel's response seemed to establish Israel as the predominant regional power. Relatedly and surprisingly, the recent rehabilitation of Assad's Syria, was quickly reversed by the crumbling of the Axis, as its supporters were either diminished by their own wars (Hamas and Hezbollah) or drained of allied resources (Russia).

Conclusion: plus ça change?

This brings us back to the present and the need to carefully adjudicate these changes to determine whether a new order is in sight. Is this really a "critical juncture", an event, or series of events that create constraints and opportunities for action, setting actors on new pathways, where "self-reinforcing processes make reversals very difficult" (Pierson 2004, 10; Fawcett 2017)? While some scholars believe that this could be a turning point both for the Middle East and global order (Gerges et al. 2024), this essay concludes on a more cautionary note. The present conjuncture, which is precisely a combination of ongoing geopolitical shifts and dramatic regional developments sparked by the Gaza War,

presents a fresh panorama but also draws on a set of past events, precedents, and pathways. It resists quick conclusions. This is not to deny the size and scale of some of the changes that have taken place, but it seeks to place them in both geopolitical and historical context. Rather than assuming we are at the dawn of another new world order, we should take stock, look back, and consider the elements of continuity as well as change.

Time will tell, and the second administration of Donald Trump has certainly offered one alternative vision, at least of what might happen in Gaza, making it, in his words, a kind of “Riviera” of the region, recalling a status once awarded to Lebanon as the “Switzerland of the Middle East.” Such thinking appears fantastical. Certainly, the Middle East is set on a different track than that predicted just a few years ago, but those predictions, like many previous ones, were never robust. Another, and possibly more likely, scenario is that continuity in many arenas will prevail over radical changes. And some of those changes have been in the offing for a while. US power, legitimacy, and reach is certainly diminished, but this process started long before the current conflict; the Palestine question has returned to center stage, but not for the first time. Perhaps the power of the now depleted “Iran axis,” contrary to alarmist predictions, was always over-hyped to illustrate and justify the “balance of threat” argument in theory and practice. And its power is diminished but not destroyed. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, singly and collectively, have long been significant regional actors and engaged in back-channel negotiations with Israel well before the Abraham Accords. Turkey is on the rise, but again, that’s not unprecedented, given its previous roles as an aspiring peace broker or mediator amid regional conflicts. Assad’s rapid demise was

unexpected, to be sure, and will inform the new regional balance of power, though Syria’s future remains highly uncertain. But we shouldn’t forget what happened after Saddam Hussein’s ignominious fall and how events in Iraq, facilitated by the disastrous US-led intervention, produced unforeseen consequences and fed directly into the movements around the Arab Uprisings, whose consequences are still unfolding. And the growing empowerment of Israel, post-Iraq War and post-Arab Uprisings with its robust US guarantees is nothing new, even if it has been facilitated by the horrors of war.

What is clear is that the “New Middle East” today is a much more mobile and fluid construction which defies easy description. Certainly, it cannot be characterized only by “broken” or “artificial” states and failed institutions. There are weak and contested states with still porous borders, but the region contains major powers, some of whom are already acting as veto players in world politics and multilateral institutions. Thinking about the behavior of leading Arab states in the Ukraine War and the Saudi hosting of US-Russia talks is just one case in point; the Gaza War could still prove to be another. In a recent development, the League of Arab States, often described as a fossilized institution, has laid down its alternative reconstruction plan for Gaza, showing that Arab institutions embodying Arab norms, today as in the past, still have a role to play in a changing Middle East order (Matthiesen 2024). ♦

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Research Symposium: New Regional Order

Is a New Regional Order Emerging in the Middle East?

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Israel's response to the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, has reopened old wounds and deepened tensions, with major implications for the United States. Israel pursued a war of annihilation in Gaza, aimed at eradicating Hamas, resulting in the death of thousands of Palestinian civilians and the destruction of the hospitals, schools, and infrastructure. Israel's military operation has been criticized widely by many international agencies as disproportionate and unwarranted. South Africa brought a case of genocide against Israel to the International Court of Justice, a case that is deemed "plausible" by the UN's top judges despite Israel's protests (Casciani 2024). In December 2024 Amnesty International issued its own report on the war and condemned it as genocidal (Amnesty International 2024). Throughout the international outcry against the way Israel was conducting its war in Gaza, the United States remained steadfast in its support of Israel and repeated Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's mantra of self-defense. This position has done enormous damage to the US image in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, key regional players, already had con-

cerns about the reliability of the United States as a guarantor of their security before the current crisis. They were unhappy with the nuclear deal with Iran, negotiated during Barak Obama's presidency in 2015. They complained that it gave Iran a free hand to pursue an interventionist regional policy to their detriment. In spite of assurances from Washington, these states felt sidestepped. The region was shocked again in 2020 when the United States, this time during Donald Trump's presidency, negotiated an unconditional withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The US exit took place in 2021 during Joe Biden's presidency. The Taliban rolled into Kabul within days. After investing blood and treasure for two decades, Washington gave up Afghanistan to the very forces it had vowed to fight, leaving its allies to scurry for safety. These experiences have not been reassuring for Arab leaders who have traditionally relied on the United States for their security.

Washington's unconditional support for Israel during the Gaza war has further strengthened the view in the region that the priorities of the United States do not necessarily match regional interests. This realization has given impetus to two trends: search for security

diversification and a growing awareness of the need for self-sufficiency.

The perception of US disengagement from the Middle East has opened the door for China (and, to a lesser extent, Russia) to step in and fill the void. China has pursued greater engagement with the Middle East through its Belt and Road Initiative. Major investments in infrastructure without asking for political reforms or expecting conformity with a normative framework have made China an attractive partner. Beijing's insistence on the sanctity of state sovereignty and the projected image of non-interference with the internal affairs of other states presents a sharp contrast with the history of US involvement in the Middle East. The United States was widely seen as trying to remake the region in its own image. This, of course, caricaturizes facts. The reality of the Middle East experience with the United States has been far more complex. Yet these impressions have taken hold of the political imagination, and China has been keen to take advantage of them. China's quiet diplomacy to bring the Saudis and Iranians to the table in 2023 – ending seven years of diplomatic rupture – was a significant win for Beijing (Berg 2023). While China is careful not to over-extend its reach, it has signaled its interest in upholding regional security through bilateral strategic agreements with Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE.

At the same time, there is a growing realization among rich Arab states that they need to take charge of their own national security and reduce reliance on great powers. This realization has fed growing investment in security and the purchase of military hardware as well as diplomatic efforts at tension-reduction (Lucenete 2024). Saudi and UAE overtures to Iran in recent years are significant indicators

of a paradigm-shift, reflecting a realization in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that hostility towards Iran, pursued by President Trump in his first term and resumed in his second, breeds further regional instability and detracts from major economic development and diversification plans.

The Middle East regional order is in flux. The reliability and primacy of the United States are in question; China has sought to take advantage of this opportunity, especially in the oil-rich Persian Gulf littoral states to satisfy its energy needs. At the same time, regional players are searching for self-reliance. This is most evident in the growing diplomatic relations by Arab states with Iran, a recognition that isolating Iran would be counter-productive for regional stability. This may herald a new regional order, one in which regional players exercise greater autonomy in their relations with the United States and diversify their security partnerships to gain leverage and expand their scope of decision-making. ♦

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Chronicle of a Post-October 7 "Middle East Order" Foretold

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Introduction

My title invokes Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, which narrates an honor killing in reverse chronology. The story begins with a killing, and readers learn that almost everyone knew about it but did not prevent it. Three critical themes run through the author's narrative that resonate with our analysis: societal conformism, abdication of collective responsibility, and complicity. These dynamics provide a poignant lens for examining the regional response to the 7 October 2023 attacks and its aftermath. For, there is nothing fundamentally "new" about what we have witnessed since 7 October. While the scale of destruction is unprecedented in our lifetime, the methods used by Israel are not. For years, Israel has been testing and resetting the limits of the laws of war in its conduct of urban warfare (Gordon 2023). The regional actors' abdication of collective responsibility, conformism, and complicity is also not new. I contend that what we have observed since 7 October is emblematic of an order that began to form after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991, surfaced after the Oslo Accords in 1993, and crystallized in the 2020 Abraham Accords. I will briefly examine these three mileposts in the making of the not-so-new Middle East

order.

The Gulf War: Abdicating Collective Responsibility

The 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was a turning point that allowed some regional actors to abdicate what had long been viewed as an Arab collective responsibility towards Palestinians. Since then, individual Arab states have found it easier to break from the rest of the Arab World and establish closer security relations with the United States and (covertly) Israel.

By establishing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981, the Gulf states had signaled their differing insecurities from the rest of the Arab world. Still, they had found it difficult not to toe the line on the Israel/Palestine issue, fearing Arab public opinion. In 1991, by failing to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, PLO leader Yasser Arafat inadvertently provided GCC members with an opportunity to distance themselves from the Palestinian cause.

Notwithstanding their differences, GCC members share a significant characteristic: they are rentier states with weak relationships with their citizens. While civil society is cons-

trained, activists have historically found ways to express solidarity with the Palestinian cause, as this has been one of the few issues that permit limited dissent from the regime. Following the 1991 war, GCC members used Arafat's position as a pretext to decrease their reliance on Palestinian and other Arab labor. This move had consequences for civil societal activism about the Palestinian cause in that workers who had historically played critical roles in organizing local oil embargoes or staging anti-regime protests when they thought insufficient action was taken to address Palestinian suffering were replaced with more precarious Southeast Asian laborers.

The Oslo Accords: Getting Comfortable in Conformism

The 1993 Oslo Accords expanded the opening allowed by the 1991 war, with Arab states adapting to new rules. In 1994, Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel, while others began exploring relations with Israel despite the limitations of the Oslo Accords.

At the time, Edward Said highlighted the cynicism of both Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in signing the Oslo Accords. Said considered Arafat's position cynical because he signed the agreement without fully understanding the situation in Israel and the occupied territories, having been in exile for decades. With the Oslo Accords, Israel gained recognition without returning significant land, acknowledging Palestinian sovereignty, or addressing the refugee issue. Meanwhile, Arafat returned to the West Bank and assumed leadership of the newly formed Palestinian Authority. Essentially, Oslo was a lifeline for Arafat, who had lost his grip on the Palestinian people, as seen during the first Intifada and after his isolation in 1991.

For Rabin, it was cynical because he brought Arafat back to police Palestinians. As he stated, "I prefer the Palestinians to cope with the problem of enforcing order in the Gaza [Strip]... They will rule there by their methods, freeing... the Israeli army soldiers from having to do what they will do" (quoted in Said 1995, 7). This statement reveals the accords' underlying rationale, prioritizing Israeli control from the outset of the peace process.

Hamas's 2006 victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections occurred amid increasing authoritarian rule by the Palestinian Authority. It is ironic, if not tragic, that Israeli authorities now use the 2006 elections to justify targeting Palestinians in Gaza as Hamas supporters, despite the historical support Israel provided to Hamas to sow discord among Palestinians. By the mid-2000s, the desire for normalcy was so high among Palestinians and the broader Arab public that even after Israel's lack of commitment to its obligations became evident, there was no overwhelming pressure on Arab states to sever ties with Israel. Many regional states (including Türkiye) strengthened their ties with Israel during this period, politically, economically, or through intelligence, even as some maintained the façade of non-recognition at the diplomatic level.

The Abraham Accords: Complicity Institutionalised

When the Abraham Accords were signed in 2020, the United States touted them as an effort to normalize relations between Israel and those Arab states that wanted to show a united front against Iran. The group soon began to expand, with Morocco joining Bahrain and UAE. At the time of the 7 October attacks, Saudi Arabia was rumored to be close to

joining. What is left unsaid in this narrative is that the Abraham Accords also provided the Arab signatories with access to Israel's unparalleled surveillance technology and spyware capabilities. Indeed, the agreement has served a dual function: legitimizing Israel's military control over the occupied Palestinian territories while simultaneously entrenching the Arab signatories' regime-security-focused (previously covert) military and intelligence ties with Israel (Fatafta 2023).

After the October 7 attack by Hamas and the subsequent Israeli devastation of Gaza, even as Israel's breach of the laws of war became impossible to overlook, regional actors found themselves in a bind. If they aligned with public opinion and threw their weight behind the Palestinian cause, they risked alienating Israel. Such a move would also potentially jeopardize their access to Israeli surveillance technology, spyware, and intelligence capabilities, which are critical components in maintaining their authoritarian rule against domestic dissent. While the horrific nature of Hamas's 7 October attack provided the context for inaction in the short term, as Israel's military campaign progressed throughout 2024 and even extended into Lebanon, the degree of institutionalization of regional actors' complicity became increasingly evident.

Conclusion

As in Marquez's novel, the "Middle East order" unfolding before us was, in many ways, foretold. The 1991 Gulf War marked a turning point away from collective Arab responsibility toward the Palestinians, and the Oslo Accords underscored the region's move towards conformism, setting a precedent for the Abraham Accords, which institutionalized complicity in Israel's actions.

The regional actors' inability to respond to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza reflects not a sudden shift but the endpoint of years of prioritizing regime security over solidarity with Palestinians. ♦

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Israel's War and the Siege of Arab Regimes

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Until the eve of October 7, 2023, the Palestinian question seemed an issue of the past relegated to the background of actors' priorities in the Middle East region. Israeli leaders believed they had managed the Gaza situation by maintaining a blockade for over 16 years. However, Hamas launched a sophisticated operation, "Al-Aqsa Flood" that shattered this status quo. In response, Israel, with support from the United States and some European governments, launched not only a destructive war in the Gaza Strip but also a regional war, involving Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Iran, to reshape the Middle East. This regional war has revealed the erosion of Arab regimes and the pivotal role of armed non-state actors in shaping the regional order.

Israel's wars exposed Arab regimes' domestic and regional vulnerabilities. Syrian territories have been attacked by Israel amid exceptional silence by the Assad regime until its demise at the end of 2024 (Hassan 2024). Following the regime's fall, Israel seized the moment to expand its military occupation into the buffer zone of the Golan Heights in a historical land grab of Syrian territories. Arab regimes, which survived the 2011 Arab uprisings based on support from foreign patrons, are increasingly unable to conduct independent foreign policy. Egypt and Jordan have faced external pressure from US and EU patrons, on which they long relied for aid and sup-

port, to align their policies with the US agenda supporting Israel. In the meantime, their foreign policies are far from representative of their domestic populations, which overwhelmingly support the Palestinian cause. The gap between regimes and their people has significantly widened, and where the people mobilized (or even attempted to mobilize) for the Palestinian cause, regimes have mostly suppressed any expression of pro-Palestinian feelings (Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich 2024, 12–14). A survey conducted in 15 Arab countries showed that 92 percent of respondents believed the 'Palestinian cause is a cause for all Arabs and not the Palestinian people alone', up from 76 percent in 2022 (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies 2024).

Non-state actors emerged as resilient actors capable of manoeuvre, learning, and adaptation. Despite Israel's exceptionally offensive war in Gaza, depopulating cities and flattening much of the territory, its strategy has proven ineffective at eradicating Hamas (Wermenbol 2024). Even after 15 months of total war, Hamas managed to inflict casualties on the Israeli military. This forced the Israeli army to return to areas of Gaza that were thought to be cleared of fighters. In the meantime, Hamas changed its tactics shifting from open combat to guerilla tactics, which reveal the group's evolving strategies and resilience (Mehvar and Khmour 2024). In

Lebanon, even though Israel achieved several tactical wins over Hezbollah, including the assassination of its leader Hassan Nasrallah and numerous key leaders in addition to the pager attack, Hezbollah demonstrated resilience through its drone and missile attacks on northern Israel and key cities, such as Haifa and Tel Aviv, while successfully repelling Israel's ground operation. As the cease-fire in Lebanon was concluded, it has become evident that Israel was unable to achieve its key goal: pushing Hezbollah north of the Litani river to secure northern Israel and allow displaced Israelis to return home. And Hezbollah is far from destroyed.

Some non-state actors, which were peripheral to the broader Middle East conflict — such as the Houthis in Yemen and Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq — have played a larger role and deepened their regional influence. The Houthis have disrupted shipping with connections to Israel traveling through the Red Sea, forcing them to reroute around Africa, putting further pressure on Israel. The US-UK coordinated attack on Yemen seems far from successful in intimidating the Houthis or bringing any stability to the Red Sea maritime route (Şeker 2024). Kataib Hezbollah, a group currently linked to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, has shown exceptional autonomy beyond its role as an Iranian proxy by attacking US bases in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan against the wishes of the ICGC.

By taking action against Israel, these non-state actors have won the “hearts and minds” of their local populations as well as regional publics. They emerged as the symbol of defence of Palestinian rights and Arab dignity, a picture that Arab regimes can no longer represent. Hamas, whose popularity had been

decreasing before October 7, has re-invented its regional image and enhanced its ideological and political relevance. According to the various polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip between December 2023 and September 2024, there remains a majority that continues to view Hamas' decision to carry out the October 7 attack as ‘correct’, although that majority is now a minority in Gaza in the poll conducted in September 2024.¹ At the regional level, Abu Ubaida, the longtime spokesman for Hamas's Al-Qassam Brigades — a mysterious figure, always masked in a red kaffiyeh, known as Al-Mulatham (‘the masked’ in Arabic) — has emerged as a cultural, political phenomenon over social media, street art, and banners (Agathocleous and van Veen 2024). Hezbollah, whose popularity in the Arab world was tarnished as a result of its support for the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, was able to regain some of its previous image as a defender of the Arab cause at the regional level. The Houthis have equally gained supporters across the Arab world, transcending sectarian divisions (Jalabi 2024), and its military spokesperson — Yehia Saree — became a widely popular figure. PSR polls found that residents of Gaza and the occupied West Bank ranked the Houthis' response to the Israel-Hamas war as the most satisfying among regional actors.

As Arab regimes have become more rigid, unable to conduct independent foreign policies or appeal to their people, non-state actors emerged as competitive actors seeking to fill this void by challenging external interventions in the region, while building deeper and wider societal support and conducting foreign policies that yield popular support. ♦

¹ <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/991>

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Hegemony, Resistance, (Dis-)Order

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Introduction

Wars are critical junctures that disrupt existing orders. They signify a transformation from a recent past to a hitherto invisible future. The 2023-2025 Gaza War is such an event that will herald the emergence of a new regional order in the Middle East. The signs of the new order did not start with Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 or with Israel's genocidal war on Gaza (UN, 2024). The first signal came in September 2024 when Israel detonated thousands of pagers held by Hezbollah members, conducted thousands of raids on Lebanon, and assassinated the movement's leader, Hassan Nasrallah (Bassam and Mackenzie 2024), effectively debilitating Hezbollah. This was followed on 8 December by the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, which isolated Iran, eroding the Resistance Axis. These developments will pave the way for the U.S. to seek hegemony in the Middle East. But in practice, the absence of a legitimate resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict will keep the region unstable and may generate resistance to U.S. and Israeli hegemonic ambitions.

Hegemony and Resistance

The erosion of the Resistance Axis and the emergence of the U.S. as a dominant power seals a long interlude: a century-old period between the British-French domination after the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire (1920-1952) and 2025. That period saw various attempts by regional powers, like Jamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt or Imam Khomeini's Iran, to challenge Western hegemonic strategies in the region, but one after the other faltered due to intra-regional rivalries and wars with Israel. Arab anti-colonial struggles, intra-regional rivalries, and wars offered Israel, the West's strongest ally, numerous opportunities to realize its goals. The 1967 Arab defeat against Israel dealt a fatal blow to Nasser's Cairo-based "Pan-Arab" regional order. The 1979 Camp David agreement returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt but neutralized it in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Iraq-Iran war (1980-88) effectively neutralized two of the West's regional rivals.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria and Iran became the two middle powers that challenged U.S. hegemony in the region (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 1997). Their support of Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and

Hamas gave them influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The failure of the Oslo Peace Process and Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon (2000) and Gaza (2005) consolidated the alliance and legitimized it in the eyes of many Arabs. The U.S. occupation of Iraq (2003-2011) and the rise of a predominantly Shi'a regime there offered Iran a strategic opportunity to connect Tehran to Beirut. In addition to its nuclear program, this plan, dubbed by its rivals as a "Shi'a Crescent," threatened Arab regimes and brought some of them (officially, UAE and Bahrain) closer to Israel.

But the weakening of the Resistance Axis started with the Syrian uprising that targeted Assad's regime in 2011 and pitted his regional allies against rivals in a protracted war that not only destroyed Syria but also undermined the power of Assad's regime and army. Iran and Hezbollah's intervention in support of Assad (and interferences in Iraq and Yemen) delegitimized and isolated the two actors in the region (Hinnebusch and Saouli 2020). When Hamas attacked Israel in 2023, the Resistance Axis was caught unaware; but to preserve its ontological security, Hezbollah engaged in 'constrained warfare' with Israel (Saouli 2024). Israel's attacks on Hezbollah in September 2024, akin to the fatal attack on the Egyptian army in 1967, have weakened Hezbollah (Mazzetti et.al, 2025). The fall of Assad has severed the geographical link between Hezbollah and Iran, curtailing Iran's strategic reach. In Syria, *Hay'at al-Tahrir* is in the process of regime building that, if successful, will diminish Iranian influence there. Its transitional leader, Ahmed Al-Shara'a, is a close ally of Turkey and is seeking recognition from the U.S. and its Arab allies in the region.

These developments offer the U.S. unprecedented influence in the region. Most regimes

in the region continue to depend on its military and economic support. In theory, the U.S. could establish hegemony and a regional order organized on the Westphalian principle of the territorial state secured by international law and, potentially, regional economic integration—a pax Americana! Such an order will secure U.S. interests, enable the pivot to China, and generate much-needed stability for a region that has suffered many wars and tragedies since its inception a century ago (Hinnebusch 2003; Stein 2021). The decline of irredentist and transnational projects, like Islamism and Arabism, may facilitate the transition to such a regional order.

A Multi-polar (dis-)Order?

However, this prospect is unlikely to materialize because of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The emerging regional order will be shaped by the U.S. and Israeli visions (which are not necessarily identical) *and* resistance to these visions by their adversaries. Having isolated Iran, pressure on which will increase from within and without, and debilitated the Resistance Axis, Israel now perceives a golden opportunity to realize its Zionist goals: a Jewish state over all the territory, including the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But Zionism will have to face the reality that has haunted it since its birth: what to do with the (7 million) Palestinians that live in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip—let alone the Palestinian Diaspora. The genocide in Gaza, which made the tiny enclave uninhabitable for its 2.5 million inhabitants and will require decades to rebuild, has led President Trump, echoing the Israeli far-right, to make appalling proposals about transferring Gazans to Jordan and Egypt (Gritten 2025) or elsewhere. Simultaneously, Israel would focus on the annexation of the occupied West Bank. In this permissive regional order, Israel will attempt to become a

regional gendarme that deters, represses, and constrains threatening actors from Lebanon to Syria, Iraq, Iran, or Yemen.

But these attempts are likely to generate resistance, not least from Arab regimes whose stability and legitimacy would be threatened by Zionist goals. The decline of the Resistance Alliance will pit US/Israel against U.S. regional allies. Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have opposed US/Israeli plans for the Palestinians. The death of the two-state solution, which regional as well as international states see as the only viable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, will generate regional instability and might spark a new wave of uprisings if Arab regimes remain complacent about it. Such a scenario might draw new geopolitical fault lines bringing Arab regimes closer to Turkey (whose influence in Syria is growing) and Iran. Israeli incursions into Syria and Lebanon will test the legitimacy of their rulers; the absence of Israeli restraint might restore the conditions for armed resistance against it. Unlike the post-Ottoman era (1920-45), the emergence of these fault-lines might deepen the influence of U.S. rivals, Russia and China, in the region.

The choices actors pursue during critical junctures set trajectories that constrain their future behavior. In envisioning a new regional order that secures their interests, the U.S. and Israel might be creating a hostile, multi-polar, and unstable order.♦

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Is a New Regional Order Emerging in the Middle East in the Aftermath of October 7?

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Through a combination of miscalculations, overreach, and unintended consequences, a new order is emerging in the Middle East in the wake of 7 October 2023. But it may not be the kind of order the United States and Israel hope to see. Instead, the maximalist agenda of the Israeli right, unreservedly embraced by the Trump administration, could stimulate a fragile Middle Eastern unity opposed to it and negate the benefits of neutralizing Iran's "Axis of Resistance."

Since 1979, and especially from 2003, the primary axis of conflict in the Middle East has been that between the US-backed Arab states and Israel, on the one hand, and Iran and its allies, on the other. Those Arab states that concluded peace treaties with Israel (Jordan and Egypt) actively assisted Israel in its occupation of Palestinian territory, while those that did not (the monarchies of the Gulf) quietly abetted it in deradicalizing the Palestinian resistance and containing its state sponsors. Iran, meanwhile, substantiated its revisionist status by cultivating clients in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Yemen, which correspondingly increased the sense of insecurity felt by other Arab regimes and helped them to claim American support.

Turkey's entry onto the regional stage from

the latter half of the 2000s complicated this bifurcated regional order, pitting an axis of "resistance" against an opposing one of "moderation". Central to the Turkish quest for regional influence was Ankara's endorsement of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood's Palestinian iteration, as a more democratically legitimate and efficacious representative of Palestinian aspirations than the supine Palestinian Authority. From 2011 Turkey also threw its weight behind the Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere. The Turkish model was in many ways more threatening to Saudi Arabia and Israel than the Iranian model as it offered a new formula for regional engagement with the West that would undermine US commitment to both Arab authoritarianism and maximalist Zionism. It also posed a greater challenge to Iran's model of Islamic resistance than did Israel or the Arab monarchies by dint of its greater potential to structurally penetrate Sunni Arab societies.

American disillusionment with Islamism in the context of the rise of ISIS, combined with Iranian and Saudi counter-revolutionary interventions (in Syria and Egypt, respectively), halted the rise of the Turkish model in the region. But the regional order did not simply return to the bifurcated antagonism that had prevailed pre-2011. Perceptions of American withdrawal from the Middle East sparked

a series of regional rapprochements. Under Chinese auspices, Saudi Arabia re-established diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic and subsequently reconciled with the regime in Syria. Turkey was able to mend its relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt—though notably not Assad. To complete the picture, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman openly confirmed that relations between the Kingdom and Israel were on the cusp of normalization (Spetalnick and Beech 2023).

It was in this context of growing regional rapprochement that Hamas launched its unprecedentedly lethal Al-Aqsa Flood operation on 7 October 2023. A response not only to the unremitting siege of Gaza but also to Arab-Israeli normalization at Palestine's expense, the attack precipitated a genocidal retaliation from Israel. It has succeeded in torpedoing the process of normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel and brought Palestine back to the top of the diplomatic agenda. But if Hamas's intention was to tip the balance of power in the region toward the "Axis of Resistance", the strategy has been a resounding failure.

Israel's crushing response to the Hamas attack did indeed vivify the "Axis", prompting Hizbullah to open a northern front in solidarity with Palestine and forcing the first-ever direct Iranian military assault on Israel. But Hizbullah has paid a heavy price, and Iran's regional prestige and credibility have plummeted (Shami 2024). Although US allies Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey have also been exposed as, at best, incapable of restraining Israel and, at worst, complicit in its actions, Iran's abandonment of the Assad regime to its fate in November 2024 signaled Tehran's turn toward retrenchment. Its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia has notably held.

The blow to Iran's regional ambitions has removed a major incentive for Saudi Arabia to normalize with Israel anytime soon, particularly considering the severe reputational damage such a step would now invite. America's embrace of maximalist Zionism, unambiguously evidenced by Donald Trump's February 2025 proposal to "clean out" the Gaza Strip of its inhabitants and resettle them in Egypt and Jordan, has exposed the futility of signing peace treaties with Israel and generated powerful incentives for Arab and Turkish cooperation with Iran *against* the US and Israel. The "Turkish model", to the extent it still exists, no longer seriously threatens Saudi regional interests, and the Kingdom is closely involved with Ankara in the political transition in Syria. Iran will likely not abandon the resistance model altogether, but at the same time, it has few incentives to antagonize its neighbors.

Peace with Israel has, since the 1970s, been central to Middle Eastern state strategies to win economic, military, and political support from the United States to secure their regimes against internal threats. Complicity in a new Palestinian *nakba* would expose Western-allied regimes to unprecedented domestic pressure, and with Washington apparently nonchalant about this potential, the option of a more integrated regional order—of Arab states, Turkey, and Iran against Israel—may now represent the most appealing option. It will, however, be a negative and fragile unity based upon the absence of any attractive or viable alternatives. And whether a more integrated region, with all states except Iran still heavily dependent upon the West, will yield tangible benefits for Palestinians is very much an open question. The Palestine cause, with or without Hamas at its helm, is not going to disappear. A potential revival of Russian capacity in the region—particularly if it can

secure victory in the Ukraine conflict and in the context of the US potentially cutting aid to Egypt and Jordan (Kanno-Youngs and McCreesh 2025) or a more assertive Chinese regional role could easily resuscitate Iran's capacity to challenge Israeli, Saudi, and Turkish dominance and rearrange the pieces on the regional chessboard once more. ♦

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Contesting Israel's "New" Middle East Project

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In his January 1991 State of the Union address, a few months after Iraq invaded Kuwait, US President George H.W. Bush proclaimed a “new world order” [Bush 1991]. An energy-dependent US, free of Cold War constraints, sought to dominate the wider Middle East by destroying the Iraqi armed forces and infrastructure, crippling Iraq with sanctions, and then establishing a hegemonic security architecture with military bases across the region. Its main goals were to secure control of Gulf oil and, starting with the Bill Clinton presidency, to prioritize Israeli interests above all others in the region.

The Middle East has since absorbed two major dynamics to re-shape the region: the US push to re-engineer recalcitrant states after 2003 and the Arab uprisings’ people-centered mass mobilization against authoritarian regimes starting in 2010. Each of these dynamics has pitted contradictory forces seeking order transformation against those fighting for order maintenance, and each has yielded unexpected results creating new actors and further instability.

Today we are witnessing a third such re-ordering dynamic precipitated by the post-October 7 genocidal war in Gaza and the dismantling of the Iran-led regional alliance. Israel, with total support from the US, is

attempting to redraw the Middle East map to ensure its regional primacy and accommodate its expansionist project, and to force an end to the Palestine question. The success of this Israeli project, however, is uncertain in the longer-term as it requires constant violence to pacify oppositional regional actors; proactive blocking of international and regional consensus to achieve stability through negotiations, particularly with Iran; and the continuation of unqualified US support.

To understand the current emerging regional order, with all its uncertainties, we need to first frame it within the broader context of the other two regional transformations that led respectively to Iran and Turkey’s rise (along with their attendant regional allies) and to the corresponding insecurity of America’s main allies in the Gulf and Israel. Social changes across the region, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Israel, over this time also played a key role, along with the structural change in American power and the gradual shift away from a US “rules-based” order to a more competitive global one.

The first Middle East re-ordering dynamic started in the context of the post-2001 US “war on terror,” where Iraq, once again, was at the center of a renewed “imperial moment for America” (Sick, 2002). Led by hardline and

staunchly pro-Israel neoconservatives, the US dismantled the Iraqi state and ushered in a regional transformation project to forcibly re-engineer states that, like Iraq, had not fully submitted to American, or Israeli, hegemony. These included Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and the biggest prize of all, Iran (Clark 2007).

The neocon project was eventually defeated by a counterinsurgency against US occupation forces in Iraq and resistance forces in Palestine and Lebanon, where Israel, acting as America's proxy, failed to achieve its declared objective to crush Hizbullah in its 2006 war on Lebanon (Makdisi 2011). Instead, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah emerged as the most popular leader across the Arab world, and Iran's regional ascendancy was confirmed. US failure in Iraq and Iran's growing counterbalance to US/Israel hegemony in the region, embodied through an "Axis of Resistance," set up a two-decade rivalry with an increasingly insecure Saudi Arabia that feared the weakening of protective US security architecture.

The second re-ordering dynamic in the Middle East emerged from the Arab Uprisings that started in late 2010 in Tunisia and then spread across the region (Makdisi 2017). Unlike the neoconservative project, this attempt at order transformation was initially more people-centered (Sadiki 2016) and triggered popular mobilization led by increasingly influential non-state players such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Hazbun 2015). With US President Barack Obama seeking to pivot away from the Middle East, regional actors, particularly Turkey, started acting more autonomously to assert their influence (Boserup et al 2017).

With the established US regional order under threat, counter-revolutionary forces led

primarily by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE supported the suppression of popular forces from Egypt to Palestine. Their central goal was to contain a perceived "neo-Ottoman" Turkish-Qatari project aiming to transform regional security dynamics and dominate post-uprising societies through national Muslim Brotherhood projects (Caffero 2019). Saudi-Turkish relations entered a decade-long regional "confrontation" (Ulrichsen 2022), and official Israel-Turkish relations deteriorated, at least performatively, to reflect huge popular support for Palestinians and Turkey's desire for legitimating its leadership position across the Islamic world.

Concurrently, during this second re-ordering period, core Axis members, comprising Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Hizbullah, and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), formed their "first wartime coalition" in 2013 to intervene militarily in defense of the Syrian state—pivotal to the Axis's regional viability—that faced both a popular uprising of its own and a Gulf, Western and Turkish-sponsored armed rebellion (Saad 2024). This wartime Axis coalition consolidated further by supporting the PMU's fight in Iraq against the Islamic State, Yemen's Ansar Allah (Houthi) war against a Saudi-led coalition, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad's resistance against successive Israeli invasions of besieged Gaza. Meanwhile, in Lebanon, Hizbullah built up a huge arsenal of sophisticated weaponry and Hassan Nasrallah became the de facto regional leader of the Axis.

On the eve of October 7, 2023, then, America's main regional allies in the Gulf and Israel felt increasingly insecure at the prospect of a multipolar regional configuration that would include Iran and Turkey within the context of a perceived diminishing influence of the US. The latter appeared intent on establishing a

regional security architecture less reliant on direct US military involvement and more on building a regional coalition to contain Iran, maintain some form of Palestinian self-rule (albeit on shrinking territory), and normalize Gulf-Israeli relations, embodied most visibly in the 2020 Abraham Accords. This official US intent was consistent throughout the respective terms of presidents Obama, Trump, and even Biden until after October 2023.

While the Saudis and Israelis, during this time, both resented Iran/Axis's and Turkey's (with Qatar) respective rise and feared potential US disengagement, they took different paths to adapt to these changes. While the Saudis moved towards diplomacy, the Israelis continued to agitate for war to settle the regional balance of power.

Shaken by the American nuclear deal with Iran and US inaction when Yemen's Ansar Allah targeted key Gulf infrastructure like Saudi Aramco, Saudi perception of a diminishing US security architecture incentivized more self-reliance (Baabood, 2024). Saudi Arabia, now benefiting from the rise of China and focusing on national development policies, gradually moved under MBS from a violent and punitive approach against perceived regional foes—including waging a brutal war on Yemen and laying siege on Qatar—to a strategy of accommodating Iran and Turkey to stabilize the region. In March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran announced a Chinese-brokered reconciliation agreement normalizing relations and opening the way for regional de-escalation, starting in Yemen. Significantly, the US welcomed this deal. Saudi Turkish relations, meanwhile, moved towards rapprochement after 2021.

For its part, Israel, dominated by Benjamin Netanyahu and his extremist partners since

2009, agitated for regional war and accused the US of “abandoning” it following the Iran nuclear deal and the unprecedented abstention in a UN Security Council resolution demanding a halt to all settlement construction in occupied Palestinian territory (Cortellessa 2016). It also felt threatened by Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and efforts to settle regional disputes diplomatically. At the same time, Israel increasingly became an international pariah state, losing the “legitimacy war” to the Palestinians and the global solidarity movement (Falk 2021). The UN and major international human rights organizations called Israel out as an “apartheid” regime, while the International Court of Justice investigated Israel's unlawful occupation and settlement policies, and the International Criminal Court opened an investigation into Israeli war crimes. Finally, a deeply divided Israel was increasingly at war with itself, pitting religious extremists and their messianic project to fulfill an expansionist “Greater Israel” against a more secular one trying to block a theocratic state and accepting that, in the words of former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, “Greater Israel is over. There is no such thing” (Ravid 2008).

It is against this backdrop that we can better contextualize the unfolding struggle for a third re-ordering of the region. This struggle was arguably *inevitable* for two main reasons. On the one hand, the regional projects represented respectively by the Axis and Greater Israel grew to become fundamentally mutually exclusive. On the other hand, the US failed, or was unwilling, to stabilize the region by complying with international/Arab League consensus, and Arab popular demands, on Palestinian self-determination and, after Obama, recognizing the multipolar regional reality.

If October 7, 2023, represented Hamas' and later the broader Axis' desire to re-center the region around the Palestine question (in its strategic, political and humanitarian dimensions) and re-orient it away from normalization deals, then Israel's long-standing objective under Netanyahu and his extremist coalition is to use October 7 for two main goals that would, in Netanyahu's own words, redraw the Middle East map (Berman et al 2025). Its first goal is to ethnically cleanse Palestinians, by any means necessary, including genocide (UN 2024), and erase Palestine from the map (Tharoor 2023). Its second goal is to transform the region and expand its territory by crushing Iran's regional ambitions and the Axis' resistance to a Greater Israel.

The US position has, over the past year, reversed its policies of the past 15 years by accommodating Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, most recently via the "Trump Plan" for Gaza to "get a beautiful area to resettle people, permanently" (Al Jazeera 2025). The US is also pushing to impose normalization agreements on Lebanon and Syria that would represent capitulation deals (Jawad 2025). These deals would require acceptance of the changed Middle East map and the unilateral right of Israel to police the region through drone attacks and high-tech surveillance. With the Gaza war signaling the demise of the liberal international order and its constraints on the use of force, non-compliance with these US-Israeli deals in this new dystopian reality means collective punishment of the civilian populations with impunity.

If effectively using unfettered hard power by the US and Israel to defeat the Axis—with Iran weakened regionally, Hizbullah severely degraded in Lebanon and Bashar al Assad overthrown in Syria—represented one pillar of apparent success for this Israeli-led re-or-

dering project for the Middle East, then Saudi and Mashriqi normalization with Israel and the completion of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians is the other crucial pillar needed to complete this re-ordering.

There are at least three challenges to Israel's project, however.

The first is a clear tension between the US's two main regional allies: Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel's plan to complete its genocide in Gaza, annex Palestinian lands in the West Bank, and push Palestinians into neighboring Arab states directly contradicts Saudi Arabia's (and Arab consensus') clearly declared desire to stabilize the region via normalization deals that would require recognition of a Palestinian state. Saudi Arabia, like all Arab states, is constrained by the overwhelming support for Palestinians across the Arab world and popular opposition to normalization. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's renewed engagement with Iran and its strong support for US-Iranian negotiations over a nuclear deal to enhance "peace in the region and the world" (Nereim 2025) is in direct contradiction to Israel's plans to attack Iran and draw in direct US military involvement. While Trump clearly wishes to pursue US interests via negotiations and nuclear deal with Iran, intense lobbying by neocon elements within his administration supports Israel's desire for war (Barnes et al 2025). The outcome of this struggle within the Trump administration will have a major impact on the region.

The second challenge to this re-ordering is the potential reassertion of Palestinian—and Lebanese (and potentially Syrian)—agency and resistance to an Israel that has never been as dependent on the US as it is now. The reality is that during its war on Gaza, Israeli forces failed to achieve their declared objective

of militarily defeating Hamas, just as Israel failed to advance in southern Lebanon as Hizbullah fighters successfully mounted fierce resistance against all odds. The Houthis in Yemen, meanwhile, continue to block Israeli shipping despite unprecedented attacks by the US on behalf of Israel. While the Axis may have been defeated in regional terms, local resistance may well grow again, even as solidarity with Palestinians and popular opposition to Israel continues to increase in the US despite the unprecedented violent crackdown on free speech and dissent by the Trump administration.

The third main challenge is represented by the resurgence of Turkish regional ambitions following the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. Despite close relations between Israel and Turkey in security and trade terms, there is a fundamental clash in regional interests between a Turkey that aspires to lead the Muslim world and a Greater Israel project. Syria now represents the battleground for a potential clash as each carves up a sphere of influence there, and this may well spread.

Given so much uncertainty, not just regionally but globally as well, it is impossible to predict if the Israeli-US re-ordering of the Middle East will succeed or if the many challenges—including obvious contradictions between Israeli and US interests, and new resistance forces that will emerge—they face in accomplishing their goals will constrain them and potentially create yet further unpredictable regional dynamics.

What we can be sure of is that we are in a moment of rupture, and that international consensus on regional diplomacy and the resolution of the Palestine question has a far greater chance of achieving stability than the neocon/Israeli push for further war. ♦

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Research Symposium: The Politics of Time

Introduction

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While the passage of time may be one of the few truly exogenous variables to shape our lives and interactions, it is woven into our identities, our experiences, and our political institutions in so many ways that it is often hard, if not impossible, to isolate its effects. In designing a symposium on the “politics of time” in the MENA region, we sought to cast a wide net, inviting scholars who have thought about time from diverse methodological and regional perspectives. We invited authors to reflect on the following overarching question: “How does the passage of time influence individuals’ political experiences, behavior, and engagement with political processes and institutions in your country (or countries) of expertise?” We asked our contributors to draw on their own areas of expertise to structure their interventions. Possible temporal themes, we offered, might include the political significance of particular historical events or “shocks”, the ways that age and the life course might shape individual-level

political experiences, and the political salience (or lack thereof) of generational membership.

Selin Bengi Gümrükçü is our only contributor to focus exclusively on the long-run effects of a particular historical period. Gümrükçü explores the enduring legacies of the unrest in Turkey during the 1970s and the subsequent 1980 military coup. She contends that right-wing political mobilization from this time – and its associated historical narratives and brand of nationalism – is pivotal in explaining the decline of Turkey’s democracy in more recent years.

Gümrükçü’s treatment of how narratives of the past play into public memory in Turkey is a theme that is echoed in other pieces in this symposium. For example, Sarah Anne Rennick and Tamirace Fakhoury both elucidate how politicians and regimes attempt to mold time to their own ends, whether by control-

ling the pacing of policy or by leveraging particular narratives of the country's past, present, or future. These pieces draw our attention to the concept of "chronopolitics," a term used for analyzing the organization, regulation, and strategic use of time as a tool of authority and legitimacy (see Esposito and Becker 2023). The concept questions the notion of time as an objective, linear, or universal constant, instead presenting it as a dimension that is shaped by—and shapes—social and political power dynamics. Rennick uses chronopolitics to unpack how Kais Saied's restoration of authoritarianism in Tunisia relies on manipulation of the temporal rhythm of politics, in addition to the propagation of specific imaginaries of the country's past, present, and future. This form of rule appears to have shaped how young people view their own futures and propensity for political engagement. Fakhoury uses post-civil war Lebanon as a case to reveal how governments may alternate between slow and fast policy time, both within and across policy sectors. These tactics can serve to "normalize crisis", shift responsibility or blame, and govern access to rights, among other things. Both pieces speak to how temporal elements are intentionally leveraged, or even weaponized, as instruments of control. Far from being incidental effects of bureaucratic delays or policy failures, time and temporality operate as deliberate and tactical means of governing (Stierl 2023).

Three additional contributions approach the issue of time differently and tackle questions related to the experiences and perspectives of particular cohorts, or generations. These scholars both identify and interrogate the existence of political generations, or groups shaped by critical events or similar social, economic, or political contexts at a particular stage of their life course. Following the ap-

proach of Mannheim ([1928] 1952), research often emphasizes the importance of events and experiences during one's "formative", or "impressionable", years—roughly adolescence to early adulthood (Stoker 2014, 378).

Adam Almqvist shines a light on how economic insecurity and narrowing channels of opportunity have contributed to intergenerational injustice in Jordan. When it comes to framing shared generational experiences, Almqvist highlights how the process of meaning-making is contested and shaped by cultural critics, representatives of the monarchy, and the everyday narratives of today's youth.

Ameni Mehrez asks whether the generation that came of age during the Arab Spring expresses significantly different attitudes toward democracy when compared to an older, comparison cohort. Using generalized additive models to address the age-period-cohort collinearity problem, she finds no evidence of cohort-specific effects or trends. Both Mehrez and David Patel urge us to think carefully about the assumptions we bring to our theories and analysis of the political effects of time. Patel argues that quantitative age-period-cohort (APC) research provides a helpful conceptual framework for more qualitative-based work that seeks to ascertain generational effects. On the other hand, qualitatively informed theories of the causal processes associated with time-based effects might inform quantitative analyses, too.

Time is a fundamental yet elusive force in politics, shaping identities, institutions, and power dynamics in ways that are deeply intertwined with social and historical contexts. This symposium has explored the "politics of time" in the MENA region through diverse lenses, revealing how temporal narratives,

generational experiences, and strategic chronopolitics influence political behavior and governance.

Collectively, these pieces underscore that time is not merely a neutral backdrop but an active dimension of political contestation. By bringing these perspectives together, this symposium advances our understanding of how time, in all its complexity, structures power and resistance in the MENA region and beyond. ♦

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Meaning-Making and the Politics of Intergenerational Injustice in Jordan

Adam Almqvist



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During conversations with young Jordanians, I used to ask what it was like to be young in Jordan today compared to what they imagined it was like for their parents' generation. One interviewee, Salim, said, "My dad had his education paid, went to his uncles to borrow a little money, opened his dentist clinic. It cost him JD 3,000 to get married; today, it's like JD 20,000. Back in the day, we had oil from Iraq, vegetables from Syria, and gas from Egypt." Another interviewee, Suleiman, said,

There was less competition (for the older generation), they could travel, they could do PhDs, not many people were starting businesses. They had little resources, but a lot of opportunities. We have all the resources—the phones, Google, everything is right here—but there are no opportunities! Back then, you had to go to a library to find anything, now it is right there. However, now, everyone wants to travel, everyone wants to create an app.

These testimonies indicate a simple socio-economic fact: because political-economic transformations unfold over time, the ebbs and flows of a country's economic growth socially elevate some generations who come of age during good times while prev-

enting others from flourishing. Young Jordanians today are an example of a generation that has gotten a raw deal. They have had to plan for their futures amid austerity, welfare state retrenchment, and the removal of subsidies, all of which has contributed to skyrocketing youth unemployment, later marriages, and dreams of migration. In contrast, older age groups face much lower unemployment rates, because they entered the labor market during better times and dominate the shrinking public sector and anemic private sector. While the total unemployment rate was 21% in late 2024, youth aged 15-24 faced an average unemployment rate of 46%. A young woman is more than four times as likely to be unemployed than an adult male (Tzannatos 2025).

This situation begs the question, what is the political impact of intergenerational economic injustice? Under what circumstances do the objective conditions of such injustices compel generations to politicize them, and when do young people remain quiescent? In this short essay, I argue that addressing these questions requires focusing not only on actual economic channels of opportunity but also on how young people ascribe meaning to them.

The literature on Arab politics has not been impervious to the entanglements between political-economic change and generationally-charged political agency. In particular, scholars have noted that intergenerational injustice was a pivotal antecedent to the Arab Uprisings (Achcar 2013, Bayat 2011, Singerman 2013). As Emma Murphy (2012, 7) described it, “economies with ever-wider disparities in income and wealth and restricted access to the social benefits of adulthood” led youth to “set themselves in opposition to an older generation, the generation of authoritarian rulers and those who brought them to power.” (15)

Yet, we know relatively little about the mechanisms that compel some generations suffering intergenerational injustice to shape into political collectives. As Ameni Mehrez and David Siddhartha Patel note in this volume, such analysis is further complicated by the difficulty of disentangling what constitutes a period effect (e.g., a *Zeitgeist*), an age effect (e.g., that youth are more impressionable than adults), or a cohort effect (e.g., that people who are in the same age group at the same time may share common outlooks or experiences). When approaching this question, I have discovered a surprising interlocutor in Norbert Elias, who is much less famous than his teacher Karl Mannheim for contributing to the study of generations. In one of his lesser-known works, *Studies on the Germans* (2013[1989]), Elias examined two 20th-century German youth movements—right-wing Weimar-era paramilitary groups and left-wing post-WWII terrorist groups. Both youth movements radicalized when older generations jammed up channels of upward mobility. Yet, the critical causal mechanism that politicized these cohorts was not objective life chances alone but what Elias called their “chances to meaning.”

When young officers were shut out of the military following Germany’s demobilization after World War I, instead of pursuing civilian careers, they opted to form so-called Freikorps, paramilitary volunteer units. According to Elias, the young officers recreated military prestige outside of the army because this “was the only meaningful job, a profession they understood and which gave them pleasure.” (189). Similarly, German socialist youth movements in the 1960s and '70s arose out of their perceived exclusion from politically meaningful institutions like universities and political parties. Elias notes that the grievances leading left-wing youth to mobilize “did not stem only from economic class contradictions... [but also from] ...the search for meaning, the search for a personally fulfilling purpose which can be experienced as meaningful,” (237).

From Elias’s study, we learn that to carry political salience, political actors must actively make intergenerational injustices meaningful. Many Jordanian youth are doing just that. For instance, in his satirical comic strips, cartoonist Emad Hajjaj situates youth immiseration in the context of the privileges enjoyed by older generations and political elites. In a cartoon that comments on the so-called “Unemployment Marches” of 2019, unemployed youth demanding jobs march past an older man who occupies five chairs labeled “Seats 1–5.” The old man, whose sheer size symbolizes unequal access to resources, beckons to one of the protestors while holding a sixth chair towards him and says, “Come over here... You made me very sad... and I’ve decided to donate to you one of my seats... Thankfully, I am still able to be generous.”



Figure 1. “The Unemployment Marches.” Reproduced with permission from the artist. Source: Hajjaj, Emad. 2019. “Masīrāt Al-‘Ātilīn ‘an Al-‘Amal” (“The Unemployment Marches”), Facebook. January 26. <https://www.facebook.com/AbuMahjoobNews/photos/a.327453017293610/2285825918122967/?type=3>.



Figure 2. Cartoon About Generations. Reproduced with permission from the artist. Source: Hajjaj, Emad. 2020. “Al-Ihsā‘at: Mu‘dal Al-Batāla 19 percent fil-Urdun” (“Statistics: The Unemployment Rate Is 19 percent in Jordan”), Roya News. March 8. <https://royanews.tv/news/207887>.

In another of Hajjaj’s cartoons, four elderly men sit next to each other. The first three men exclaim, “Support youth,” “Employ youth,” and “Empower youth,” while the fourth man says, “Where did the youth go? They emigrated!” Hajjaj’s cartoons interpret generational cleavages as generational conflicts. He appeals to other youth, articulating how intergenerational injustices stem from the unfair hoarding of resources by older generations and political elites.

However, conversely, generational injustices can also be rendered less politically meaningful if dominant actors, like the Jordanian regime, frame generational injustices in a different way. In 2017, while addressing the UN General Assembly, Crown Prince Hussein said, “if our generation is trapped in a struggle between the tradition and mindset of the past, on the one hand, and the ways and technologies of the present, on the other, we will never move forward,” (MAAP Film

Productions 2017). In other words, according to Hussein, rather than focusing on generational conflicts, Jordanian youth must transcend the generational cleavage to be successful. In a different speech, the Crown Prince told youth, “it is your turn now to build, to increase Jordan’s progress and prosperity. However, in your own ways, and with the tools of your age, because *every generation has its own identity, opportunities, and challenges*,” (Royal Hashemite Court 2018, emphasis added).

This framing of youth’s economic conditions as filled with unique opportunities is not just talk. This vision is supported by an infrastructure of youth governance—government-operated NGOs, educational reforms, and national campaigns—that encourages youth to perceive their generation as uniquely positioned to take on the challenges of their time (Almqvist 2023). As scholars, focusing our attention on meaning-making will enable us to better comprehend how this struggle over generational injustices will unfold in Jordan and the broader Middle East. ♦

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The Infrastructural Power of Time: Policymaking in Lebanon

Tamirace Fakhoury



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How do political systems use time as a governance tool and how does this usurp people's time in the process? The relationship between time and politics, referred to as chronopolitics, has been the focus of significant scholarly work (Esposito and Becker, 2023). However, this concept has yet to gain substantial recognition within the field of Middle East political studies. In this paper, I explore how policymaking in Lebanon relies on varying governance tempos and, in so doing, functions as a form of infrastructural power.¹ This includes alternating between protracted inaction and fast-paced action across various policy sectors, as well as enacting both action and inaction *within* the same policy realm.

Post-Civil War Lebanon is often depicted as a weak state with limited capacity to control its borders and respond to overlapping crises from the management of waste to multiple geopolitical insecurities (Hale 2024).² However, this apparent weakness hides a latent dimension of power: How the state draws on time to manage crises and regulate rights and service provision. Analyzing the politics of time and its infrastructural power, and how this power 'sits' within Lebanon's political system, unlocks new perspectives on the

Lebanese state.

An Assemblage of Temporalities

Lebanon's political system operates on a complex sectarian model of power-sharing, where recurrent deadlocks and veto-playing frequently hinder policymaking (Doyle 2021). It is often reported that deadlocks arise from the architecture of the power-sharing system, in which sectarian factions, driven by their competing interests, derail the consensus required to address controversies. Sectarian factions have often held veto power in the cabinet which has occasionally resulted in the cabinet's collapse. A notable example is the 2011 collapse of the Saad Hariri government following a walkout by ministers affiliated with the Shia-based Hezbollah party and their allies (Fakhoury 2019, 12).

Notwithstanding this, the politics of gridlock requires a more nuanced perspective. Sectarian power-sharing draws on clock time in various ways to sustain its longevity while creating an atmosphere of confusion. Inaction that appears to be a stubborn and inevitable result of the system's architecture actually conceals a sophisticated infrastructure of

¹ This paper is inspired by my book project, *Political Systems and Time: Timekeeping in Post-War Lebanon*.

² The author's interviews and conversations with international officials and experts reinforce this perception.

time management.

In my ongoing book project (Fakhoury 2023), I delve into what I call a ‘political ethnography of time,’ distinguishing between the technology of governance in slow times and frantic times. The post-war sectarian order governs people’s time through a rhythm that alternates between slow-burning and fast-burning crises (On this concept see Seabrooke and Tsingou 2019). Against this backdrop, it is important to examine how the government may alternate governance tempos between different policy sectors and use both slow and fast governance within the same sector.

Alternating Slow and Fast Policy Time

In the post-war period, the process of policymaking—from suggesting, discussing to implementing policy proposals—has consisted of erratic tempos that have alternated between inaction and bursts of frenetic action. Governments have rarely issued budgets or solutions to recent financial crises. This is indicative of ‘slow times’ politics. Amidst the 2019 financial meltdown, caused by political and business elites entangled in a Ponzi scheme that depleted the state’s treasury (Sawaya et al. 2023), little has been done to help people recover their savings. Yet, to divert focus from the state’s policy vacuum and promote their role as moral and security guardians of their communities, the governing elite have quickly organized crackdowns against LGBTQ individuals and refugees (Fakhoury 2024). Given that some ministers have reaped significant political and economic benefits from policy paralysis in the power sector, almost no actions have been taken to fix Lebanon’s crumbling electricity infrastructure (Verdeil 2018). Yet, in 2023, the

government engaged in aggressive advocacy against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), asking them to settle electricity fees for refugees in camps (Mohnblatt 2023). Traffic management and highway maintenance have been at the bottom of the policy-making ladder. Yet, through the Twitter account of the city’s Traffic Management Center, the Ministry of Interior regularly sends messages to organize citizens’ mobility (Monroe 2017). In doing so, bureaucracies project authority and perform urgency while avoiding the urgent issue of maintaining and upgrading roads. Analyzing policy action versus inaction over time and across various policy sectors reveals how a political system can normalize crisis as a mechanism for governing people’s access to resources.

Slowing down time through various tactics, such as delaying the integration of policy items into the policymaking agenda, refusing to advance bills into law, or declining to repeal contested laws, is a significant indicator of how the Lebanese state controls people’s access to rights. Groups such as women, LGBTIQ+ communities and refugees have been stuck within the cracks of time. Consider the stunted development of the citizenship bill that would allow women to pass their nationality on to their children despite ongoing debates on reforming the law (Pollard 2016). Take the 534 Law that criminalizes homosexuality and that, despite contention from below, has stood the test of time (Nagle and Fakhoury 2021). Still, it is not only about ‘*doing nothing*’ through strategic inaction, stalling, or procrastination. Within the same policy sector, as the below example reveals, the Lebanese state may concurrently use different governance tempos to regulate an issue.

Simultaneous Temporalities: Doing Nothing and Doing Something at the Same Time

The contrasting tempos of slow and fast governance manifest in various ways. Refugee governance is a core policy sector where contradictory temporalities play out. Consider the case of the Palestinian refugee camps that remain ‘frozen in time’ with hardly any rights granted to them even though they have been refugees for decades. In this case, the state maximizes slow *clock time*. Drawing on the myth that Palestinians’ access to resources and jobs would tip the sectarian balance of power, the Lebanese parliament has resisted addressing a bill that would improve their access to the labor market. Finally, in 2010, the parliament adopted a bill approving that Palestinians acquire some rights to work as foreigners, but they would be barred from working in about 39 syndicated professions (Bakri 2010). Alternating between doing nothing over long periods of time, such as refraining from legislating, and intermittent policy activity, only to relapse into stagnation, has been a purposeful tactic to keep Palestinian refugees socially excluded and spatially segregated.

In yet another perspective, consider the frantic temporalities of regulating displacement from Syria where the state has abruptly gone from a policy of open borders to one of acute securitization to govern Syrian refugees’ lives and legal residencies. From 2011 until 2014, the Government of Lebanon (GoL) has shifted from welcoming borders to stringent security measures. In 2015, it adopted procedures categorizing Syrians’ stay into more than seven visas and instructed the UNHCR to stop registering Syrian refugees. By issuing onerous residencies for Syrians that expire in a short-term span, the government used

short-time horizons to create persistent precarity. In 2023, the government announced plans to repatriate 15,000 Syrians monthly (UNU-CPR 2023), setting timelines widely viewed as unrealistic.

What drives the state’s logic of ‘slow time’ versus ‘frantic time’ governance within the same policy sector? Why does the state rush to regulate an issue through frantic policy tempos as the Syrian refugee issue reveals while it hardly enacts new laws or policies in other cases, for example the case of Palestinian refugees? A temporal lens enables us to track patterns and types of policy action and inaction across different policy sectors and within the same sector. Contrary to the assumption that the Lebanese state is inefficient, it generates various temporalities of governance, ranging from ‘calculated inaction’ (McConnell and ‘t Hart 2019) to hesitant action to frantic action. Understanding the drivers behind these temporalities requires a contextualized understanding. Motives range from shifting responsibility, distracting the public sphere to sustaining the political economy of sectarianism (Baumann 2024; Fakhoury 2024; 2023). A typology of the state’s patchwork of governance tempos, their drivers, and their motives is what I explore in my current work. ♦

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Is the Past Ever Truly Past? The 1970s and the Politics of Time in Turkey

Selin Bengi Gümrukçü



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As the 45th anniversary of the September 12, 1980 coup in Turkey approaches, the shadows of the military intervention and the preceding period continue to loom over the country's political landscape. The 1980 coup, the third in the history of the republic, represents a pivotal turning point in Turkish politics. Following the institutionalization of right-wing politics in the late 1970s amidst heightened levels of protest and political violence, the coup changed "the political" in the country. The junta that ruled the country for the next three years crushed the leftist movement and shifted the political landscape to the right. More broadly, it also cemented what would become Turkey's dominant political ideology over the ensuing decades – one grounded in a specific form of ethno-religious nationalism – facilitated stealth Islamization (Gumuscu 2024), and reshaped public memory.

Ethno-Religious Nationalism: The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis

Since the late 1960s left-wing students spearheaded protests, demanding greater voice not only in their school administrations but also in the broader decision-making processes in the country, making protest a daily occurrence in Turkey in the late 1960s and 1970s (Gümrukçü 2014). Amid the Cold War, this

rise of leftist youth was perceived by the state as a threat not only to Turkey's territorial integrity but also to its status as the "last surviving Turkish state" (Kenar and Gürpınar 2013). To counter this, right-wing, nationalist students were mobilized, and the clashes between these groups, or between fractions within these groups, escalated into near-civil war after 1973, with daily violent encounters. Parallel to these conflicts, an Islamist movement emerged in the 1970s, reflecting broader regional trends during the Cold War. The wave of Islamism sweeping the Muslim world reshaped Islamist rhetoric in Turkey, influenced by translated works of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb (Özkan 2017). The National Turkish Students' Union (*Milli Türk Talebe Birliği*, MTBB) became a hub for Islamist youth during this time, playing a pivotal role, with several founding members of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, politically socialized within its ranks.

The right-wing and Islamist movements gained traction through institutionalized actors such as political parties, particularly during the two "Nationalist Front" coalition governments, which ruled from March 1975 to June 1977 and from July 1977 to January 1978. These governments expanded religious

education by increasing the number of *İmam Hatip* schools, secondary schools that trained students as imams, with enrollment rising from 35,000 in 1973–74 to 178,000 in 1979–80 (Çakır et al. 2004). They also appointed right-wing academics to key positions in a top-down manner. In 1977, this occurred with Middle East Technical University’s president and board of trustees, sparking protests among students and faculty and a 9-month long boycott of classes. Similar to the ongoing protests at Boğaziçi University that started in 2021 in response to the top-down appointment of a president – a move which overturned the university’s decades-long tradition – these actions underscored state efforts to curtail academic freedom and student activism. The Nationalist Front governments also provided political opportunities and legal protection to far-right nationalist and Islamist groups, whose use of violence escalated under their governance (Gümrükçü 2023).

It was during this time that the MTTB and other organizations organized religious-themed protests, such as Friday prayers in front of Hagia Sophia, advocating its conversion into a mosque (Gümrükçü 2014) – a goal realized by the AKP in 2020. These events also contested secular national history, which does not necessarily make a reference to the Ottoman era, and would even claim a rupture between the Empire and the Republic. By contrast, Islamist organizations led commemorations of Istanbul’s conquest, framing youth as heirs to Fatih Sultan Mehmet’s legacy. This narrative gained further prominence during Erdoğan’s tenure as Istanbul’s mayor in 1994 and under subsequent AKP governments, transforming such events into grand “Conquest Festivals” featuring reenactments, military parades, and light shows (Dissard and Kurşunlugil 2020), serving as ideologically motivated reconstructions of

time.

The right-wing and Islamist movements of the 1970s employed populist and Manichean rhetoric, dismissing leftists as foreign agents and urging them to “leave the country.” Leftist youth were framed as puppets of Moscow or Beijing, juxtaposed against conservatives, who supposedly represented both “local and national” values. This rhetoric reemerged decades later, with the AKP framing opposition groups as suspicious outsiders. This was evident in Erdoğan’s characterization of Gezi Park protesters as *çapulcu* (looters) or as connected to a foreign plot to overthrow the government (Hintz 2016; Gümrükçü 2022).

This period under the Nationalist Front governments marked a shift in power within the military-bureaucratic establishment toward the right. Following the 1980 coup, the junta introduced the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” (*Türk-İslam Sentezi*), a framework that merged nationalist and Islamist elements to counter “external” ideologies deemed incompatible with Turkey’s identity. Practical measures included making Sunni Islam education compulsory and fostering the visibility of religious groups in politics. The junta’s suppression of the left and promotion of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis consolidated the right’s dominance in Turkish politics.

Collective Memory and Protests

The junta’s constitutional overhaul curtailed civil liberties, muted society, and justified the coup through a narrative of the “dark 1970s,” which portrayed the decade as chaotic and dangerous. This narrative not only suppressed activist knowledge but also fostered a fairly negative perception of street protests. While some activists from the period still organize and/or participate in protests (Gümrükçü

2010; Uysal 2017), the level of mobilization in Turkey remains lower than that observed in Western European countries (Uysal 2006). Events and possibilities of the 1970s were rendered “unthinkable” (Bourdieu 1992) by the coup’s rupture.

The legacy of the “dark 1970s” continues to shape how the current government perceives and suppresses opposition. For example, a now deceased founding member of the AKP argued in 2012 “those engaging in street movements today [in 2012] are aiming for chaos. The military has returned to the barracks, the judiciary has normalized—only the streets remain. They’re calculating whether they can do something to this government through street protests alone” (Başaran 2012). In a similar manner, in response the protests that erupted in March 2025 after the arrest of Istanbul’s mayor, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party blamed the main opposition party for “reopening the dirty pages of history’s dustbin” (Serbestiyet 2015). The Gezi Park protests in 2013 marked a turning point in the suppression of opposition, with the government mobilizing its supporters to defend the state against perceived threats. Since Gezi, mass mobilization in support of autocracy has surpassed democratic mobilization, as seen in the government’s calls for public support during crises, including the failed 2016 coup attempt (Coppedge et al. 2024).

While much of the literature on democratic backsliding in Turkey focuses on recent developments, these developments did not occur in a vacuum. The political struggles of today are echoes of unresolved tensions from the 1970s, making it imperative to revisit how the coup altered Turkey’s trajectory and continues to define its present. The 1980 coup occurred amidst heightened conflict between left- and right-wing actors, representing a

rupture in politics. There is still a lot to be explored regarding lessons derived from the past and their political implications. Examining the institutionalization of right-wing and Islamist politics in the 1970s and the subsequent 1980 coup will encourage social scientists to adopt a more historical approach to understanding democratic erosion, stealth Islamization, as well as more recent protests in Turkey today. ♦

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Attitudes Towards Democracy Post Arab-Spring: Age, Period, Cohort Analysis

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The Arab uprisings sparked widespread hopes for democracy. Scholars have extensively studied the 2011 uprisings and their consequences on collective action (Hoffman and Jamal 2014; Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014), voting behavior (Mehrez 2023; Mehrez et al. 2023; Ozen 2018), regime preferences (Tessler and Robbins 2014), and value change (Moaddel and Gelfand 2017). Central to this literature is the idea that the Arab Spring has left a lasting impact on people's political attitudes – particularly attitudes towards democracy – with notable generational differences. To what extent has the Arab Spring shifted people's political attitudes? And did its influence vary across cohorts, or did all age groups experience similar changes?

Scholars across disciplines have long studied how age (A), period (P), and cohort (C) shape people's attitudes, beliefs, and health conditions over time. In APC analysis, age refers to the individual's biological age, period refers to the specific point in time during which the individual is observed, and cohort referring to an individual's membership in a group defined by a birth year range. A major challenge in these studies is “the identification problem” - the perfect collinearity between these factors, as age = period – birth year (with cohort assignment being comp-

letely dependent on birth year). This relationship makes it impossible to simultaneously estimate the linear effects of all three variables. How do scholars address this issue?

This essay provides a brief demonstration of an APC analysis using a widely adopted methodological approach. I examine attitudes towards democracy among Arab publics following the Arab Spring – an extensively debated topic in Middle Eastern political science literature but, to the best of my knowledge, rarely subjected to empirical testing.

APC analysis

To examine the relationship between support for democracy and the interplay of age, period, and cohort effects in the Arab world, I use Generalized Additive Models (GAM). Unlike other standard linear models, which assume a constant relationship between independent and dependent variable, GAMs allow for the estimated coefficients on the regressors to vary smoothly over time. This approach is particularly appropriate for studying political attitudes, as these attitudes rarely evolve at a constant rate over time; instead, they are shaped by external events and cultural and institutional shifts. Second, GAMs help mitigate the collinearity between A, P, C by

allowing separate smooth functions for age, period, and cohort effects. Third, GAMs effectively handle nested data structures by incorporating country-level variation as random effects. This approach reduces the bias from country-specific characteristics and produces more reliable estimates.

Data

This essay relies on cross-sectional data¹ from five waves of the Arab Barometer (wave II: 2010-2011, wave III: 2012-2014, wave V: 2018-2019, wave VII: 2021-2022 and wave VIII: 2023-2024). To capture attitudes towards democracy, I use the following question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “Democratic systems may have problems, yet they are better than other systems.” This question is measured on a 4-point scale where 1 means strongly agree and 4 means strongly disagree. This question was reverse coded so that higher values mean more support for democracy. As predictors, I use age of the surveyed respondents, the survey wave (period), and cohort membership. The cohort variable is categorized based on respondents’ age in 2011—the year when the Arab Spring started. I identified two cohorts:

- Arab Spring Cohort (ages 18–25 in 2011): Individuals who were young adults during the uprisings and possibly shaped by this period of political mobilization.
- Pre-Arab Spring Cohort (ages 35–42 in 2011): Individuals who reached adulthood before the uprisings and presumably had formative political experiences in the pre-2011 era.

I assign respondents to these cohorts based on their reported age in different survey waves. For example, the Arab Spring cohort—defined as those aged 18² to 25 in 2011—progresses through survey waves as follows: 20-27 in 2013, 25-32 in 2018, 29-36 in 2022, and 31-38 in 2024. The same is done with the pre-Arab Spring cohorts who reported age 35-42 in 2011.³ By structuring the data this way, we can investigate whether democratic attitudes in the Arab world are influenced by age, period, or cohort effects during the Arab Spring.

Results

First, I fit a GAM that includes smooth effects for survey wave (period) and age, while controlling for respondents’ education level, religiosity, gender, cohort group, and accounting for country-level random effects.⁴ The partial effect plots for both wave year and age are presented in Figures 1a and 1b.

The results of the smooth effects of wave year (Figure 1a) show a downward trend in support for democracy from 2011 to 2018 which flattens after 2018. The smooth effects of age (Figure 1b) exhibit a positive trend with wide confidence intervals at the extremes (fewer observations). The trend is relatively flat for people aged between 20 and 30. However, from age 30 onward, there is an increasingly positive relationship between age and support for democracy. In other words, support for democracy increases with age. When controlling for cohort membership in the model, the linear effect of becoming politically aware before the Arab Spring is small and not

1 While it is more common to use panel data to trace different cohorts over time (the same individual interviewed over time), cross-sectional data is also used in cohort analysis. See Yang and Land (2008).

2 The Arab Barometer data only surveys people aged 18 and older.

3 I apply a 10-year gap between the two cohorts to avoid any overlapping years.

4 The countries included in this analysis are Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen.

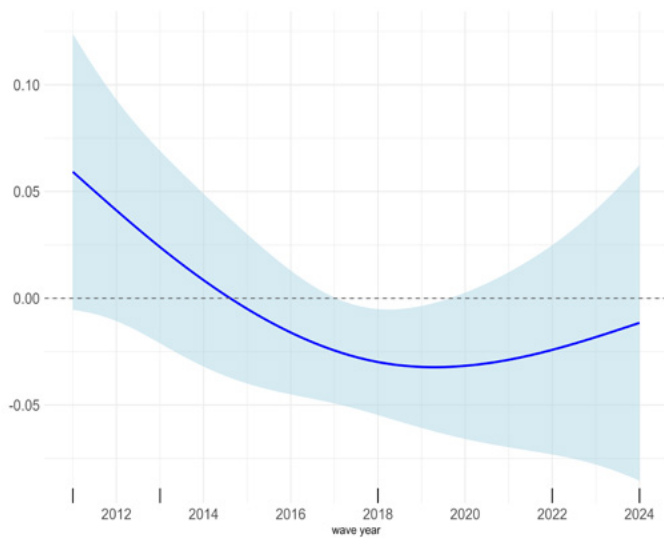


Figure 1a: Smooth effects of wave year

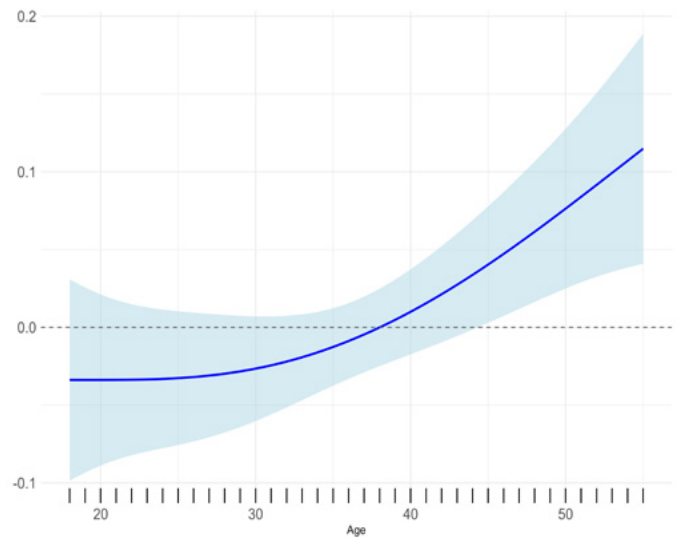


Figure 1b: Smooth effects of age

statistically significant ($\beta = -0.019$, $p = 0.638$), suggesting no meaningful difference in democratic attitudes compared to the post-Arab Spring cohort.

To test for the smooth effects of cohort groups, I fit another GAM where I include

the interaction term between survey wave and cohort which allows each cohort group to have its own smoothed trend over time while keeping the smooth effects for age. Smooth effect plots for wave year for Arab Spring vs. pre-Arab Spring cohorts are presented in Figures 2a and 2b respectively.

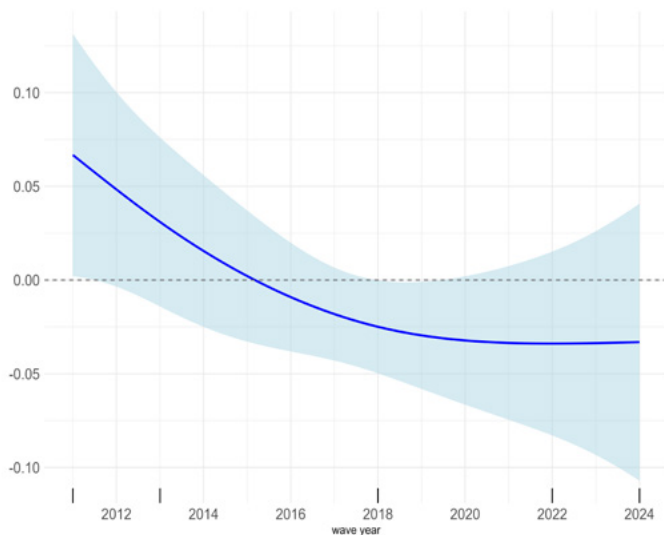


Figure 2a: Interaction between wave year and Arab Spring cohort

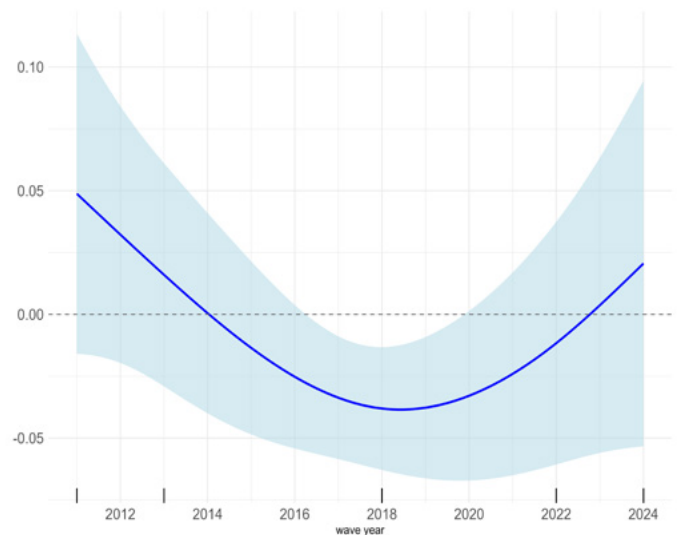


Figure 2b: Interaction between wave year and pre-Arab Spring cohort

The smooth effects of wave year for Arab Spring cohorts does not significantly differ from the one for pre-Arab Spring cohorts. To test which model best fits the data, I compare the previous model (restricted) to the more complex one with the interaction using ANOVA. The F-test results ($F=1.2202$, $p\text{-value} = 0.2907$) suggest that the model with the interaction does not significantly improve model fit compared to the simpler model. This indicates that there is no evidence of cohort specific trends. While this analysis does not detect any differences between cohorts using the available data, it does not necessarily mean that there are no differences. The results are based on a single indicator of democratic attitudes; using a more comprehensive index or alternative conceptualizations of democracy may yield different findings. Additionally, how cohort membership is defined plays a critical role. This essay employs a simple two-group cohort distinction for illustrative purposes, but more theoretically grounded cohort classifications could provide deeper insights.

Conclusion

APC analysis offers researchers the opportunity to explore temporal dynamics, but it also presents several challenges – particularly the identification problem discussed above. This essay only scratches the surface of an important yet problematic question in Middle East studies: How did the Arab Spring affect Arabs' attitudes toward democracy? Moving forward, scholars employing APC frameworks should anchor their work in robust theoretical foundations that explicitly justify their assumptions about age, period, and cohort effects. Furthermore, researchers must apply appropriate statistical techniques while acknowledging their limitations at the same time. ♦

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The Times, Are They A-Changin'? Unmuddling the Politics of Time in the MENA

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Claims of generational differences seem to be everywhere in qualitative and ethnographic studies of the Middle East nowadays. Here are several examples. Youssef El Chazli argues that participation in mass protests during the 2010-11 Arab Uprisings had a range of life-altering effects on young Egyptians' friendship networks, family lives, and careers (El Chazli 2020). Revolutions have afterlives. Marcin Alshamary found that many young Iraqis today, disillusioned with the corruption and sectarianism of their country's parliamentary democracy, express nostalgia for the strongman Ba'athist era (Alshamary 2018). Authoritarian pasts have afterlives too, even – or especially – among those who never experienced them. In a similar vein, policies are sometimes based on assumed differences among generations. Supporters of the Iran nuclear deal, for example, justified its controversial 10 to 15-year sunset clauses by noting that a new generation of Iranian political and clerical leaders will – over that time – replace those of the generation that carried out the 1979 revolution (e.g., Sick 2015). After the lives of The Revolution, so to speak.

Over the past 25 years, such generational analyses of the MENA seem to have become increasingly common. I see several reasons

for this trend. The first is the broad and important puzzle of why so many educated youth turned to Islamism in the 1980s and early 1990s. Although Carrie Rosefsky Wickham's seminal book on Islamic activism is most frequently cited for documenting Egypt's parallel Islamic sector, her core argument rests on a cohort analysis (Rosefsky Wickham 2002). She argues that the Islamic movement's ideological outreach resonated with the life experiences of an educated and underemployed generation of Egyptians, allowing the movement to capture their hearts and minds and eventually getting them to move from low-risk to higher-risk forms of activism. The second reason for the rise of generational analyses is the widespread belief that the spread of new technologies in the region in the late 1990s and early 2000s – satellite television and internet access – undermined state control over information and shaped new public spheres (e.g., Lynch 2006). Finally, a decade of seemingly “momentous events” from 2001 to 2011 – the attacks of September 11th, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the Arab Uprisings – reverberated through the MENA and were experienced by its publics in complex ways. It is widely assumed – although rarely examined empirically – that this cascade of upheavals shaped the formative years of a generation.

Yet, despite this broad interest in generational change and numerous rich ethnographies that speak to it, I posit that we still know little – with any degree of confidence – about the politics of time and if and how social generations differ from one another in the MENA. Qualitative scholars, including those mentioned above, have made bold and important claims. But future qualitative research could benefit by learning from conceptual work done by quantitative scholars on age-period-cohort effects. Quantitative scholars have had to pay close attention to conceptually differentiating between age, period, and cohort (APC) effects because of a particular statistical challenge related to deriving unique estimators for all three effects (when the *period* in which an individual is observed minus the individual's *age* equals the individual's birth year, with the latter fully determining *cohort*). It is far from clear how useful the particular strategies that quantitative scholars have developed to overcome this identification challenge might be for qualitative work, but they offer clear and consistent concepts that can travel across methodological traditions. I am not suggesting that qualitative scholars should change their feathers and become experts in R. Far from it. I merely am arguing that qualitative work on time and “generations” (broadly defined) would benefit from clearer conceptualizations and that quantitative APC scholarship offers useful legwork in this regard.

APC analysis differentiates between three possible effects of time. The first is age or life-cycle effects, linked to the social processes of aging. The second is period effects, which are external factors that affect all age groups at a particular time (e.g., wars, economic crises). The third is cohort effects – differences among age-groups – which come in two flavors. Cohort effects have tradition-

ally been understood as the sum of all the unique life experiences and exposures of a cohort from birth (a sort of structural factor). But a cohort effect can also be conceptualized as an event that is experienced differently by age-cohorts (a heterogeneous period or treatment effect). Is watching the current war in Gaza having roughly the same effect on Arabs of all ages (a period effect)? Or, perhaps, is it fueling greater rage among younger Arabs – those aged 15 to 21 – because they are still in their “formative years” (a type of cohort effect)? And how would we know?

A preliminary set of best practices for research on generations – be it qualitative, quantitative, formal theory, experimental, or any flavor of “mixed method” research – might begin by being explicit about 1) the *purported* change or difference (e.g., period or cohort) being posited; 2) why that difference, and why that specific difference instead of another (i.e., precise specification of a mechanism); and 3) whether the change or difference is being either assumed or hypothesized and then evaluated. One area in which much quantitative APC analysis falls short is in the development of refined theory, causal stories that are coherent, non-contradictory, and non-tautological. Some would say this is a strength of qualitative research: identifying new theories and addressing questions of process. Refined theories of time developed by qualitative-leaning researchers might, over time, percolate back to influence quantitative-leaning APC analyses.

How did the Arab Uprisings affect participants? If scholars focus only on participants of a certain age group – such as youth – it is difficult to know if changes in their lives over time are attributable to their participation in the uprisings or to the fact that they are growing older. Further, it is impossible to

know if the uprisings affected younger participants differently than older ones without explicit comparison. Many Arab youth today might yearn for the stability, opportunities, and services that they think were available under strongmen decades ago, but do older generations of Arabs – including those who remember those eras – feel a similar nostalgia? Perhaps we are witnessing a general “period” of nostalgia for strongmen, not the formation of a distinct generation. Or – recalling Rosefsky Wickham’s analysis of Egyptian youth in the 1980s and early 1990s – maybe there is a pattern in the region of young people being jealous of opportunities they believe earlier generations had (a type of “age” effect). How and why should we expect the generation of Iranian leaders from the 1979 revolution to differ from the generation of Iranian leaders that emerged under the subsequent Islamic Republic? These are all important questions for understanding the MENA today. Existing conceptual work by APC researchers provides a useful framework that can inform and structure qualitative comparisons and ethnographic observations to help answer them. Hopefully the next generation of research on generations will learn from the past. ♦

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Chronopolitics in Counter-Revolutionary Tunisia

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What does investigating the politics of time contribute to our understanding of political dynamics in re-autocratizing Tunisia? The literature on authoritarian resilience and democratic backsliding in the region (Lynch, Schwedler, and Yom 2022; Ridge 2022, Sadiki and Saleh 2023; Rivera-Escartin 2024) provides ample theoretical arguments and empirical evidence regarding how legal structures, institutional configurations, international alliances, and popular discontent have contributed to Kais Saied's authoritarian restoration. Yet, problematizing the politics of time as a mechanism of authoritarian reproduction can provide new insights into the dynamics shaping counter-revolutionary Tunisia. More precisely, investigating the chronopolitics of Saied's authoritarianism sheds light on how the control of political time and temporal imaginaries create structures that reinforce autocratic outcomes.

The concept of chronopolitics explores how the control of time in its manifest sense and through hegemonic narratives of the past, present, and future serve as tools of power exertion and legitimation (Clark 2019). Chronopolitics can be observed in the utilization of time for the structuring of quotidian life, in the temporal defining of political instances (the "time of politics"), and in the politicization of temporalities for specific political

purposes (Esposito and Baker 2023). In the case of Tunisia, Kais Saied's manipulation of the time of politics along with his politicization of temporalities and the meanings attributed to the past, present, and future serve as tools to diffuse opposition and produce discursive incongruity with the counter-revolutionary nature of his political project. In one vein, Kais Saied's temporal management of the rhythm and predictability of political instances has been utilized as part of a broader effort to organizationally scramble the possibility of mounting a viable opposition force. After suspending the 2014 constitution, Saied presented his new draft version only three weeks before the scheduled July 2022 referendum, providing nearly no time for the opposition to strategize or for debate to exist in the public sphere. In March 2023 he dissolved the municipal councils several months before the scheduled elections, to then announce in September that elections for local councils – institutional bodies unforeseen in the new constitution – would be held only three months later. Likewise, his announcement in July 2024 of the calendar for presidential elections left potential candidates with only weeks to meet the onerous threshold for signatures. While this is not to imply that the temporal management of political procedures since 2021 is the primary reason Saied has been able to concretize his autocratic turn, investigating the politics of time elucidates

autocratic strategies that diminish the organizational capacity for democratic resistance.

In another vein, the temporal imaginaries of the past, present, and future imbued in Saied's rhetoric contribute to a justification of his political methods while presenting a double-speak regarding the nature of his rule. With regards to the past, Saied presents a historical interpretation of the near past that entirely delegitimizes the decade of democratic transition. He describes the years following the 2011 uprising as not only chaotic and destabilizing but as an accident of history and aberration of the country's natural political order (Geisser 2023). Instead, Saied puts forth an interpretation of Tunisian history that traces the uniqueness of the country's political trajectory and the singularity of its national identity. This includes the uniqueness of the 2011 revolution, which he sets apart from the other Arab uprising of 2011 (Rahmouni 2023), but also the unparalleled will of the Tunisian nation to confront threats across history. This imaginary of the past conjures that of a nation facing repeated challenges to its independence and identity, in which it is the "people" that have resisted and risen above. This framing forms an essential dimension to Saied's brand of populism and his discourse on the defense of the nation and the re-establishment of popular sovereignty. It also underscores how the present is framed and managed.

Indeed, Saied's conspiratorial populism (Annovi 2024) hinges upon an imaginary of the present framed within a historical continuity of threat emanating from both outside and within, which he institutionalizes in the perpetual state of emergency. His narrative of Tunisia's distant and near past serves as the parameters to define the "we" of the polity and the "enemy" of the country's

political project, fueling his rhetoric of existential threat. This includes the inscribing of sub-Saharan migration as a threat to Tunisian national identity and the defining of former political elites and oppositional voices as traitors to the revolution's quest for popular sovereignty. In framing the present as a moment of acute crisis, Saied is able to repeatedly justify the renewal of the country's state of emergency (a strategy typical among the region's autocrats), thus also stretching out the temporality of the present. In this way, the fulfillment of the vision for the future he claims to be solely capable of achieving – based on economic prosperity and a renewal of democracy via the restoration of popular will as the cornerstone of governance – is perpetually delayed.

This temporal distancing of the future through the permanent liminality of the present contributes to autocratic reproduction in two important ways. First, the state of emergency not only provides extraordinary powers of repression in a context of constitutional extra-legality but also allows him to discursively distance himself from the autocratic nature of his political practice in the guise of temporal exceptionality. In this way, he is able to repeatedly claim to be re-establishing the revolutionary demand for popular sovereignty while nonetheless exercising a form of power where the people are "conspicuously absent" (Lakhal 2022). Second, the perpetuity of the exceptional period of crisis produces what Hage (2009) calls "stuckedness," a state that must be coped with and waited out rather than acted upon, thereby generating political ambivalence and self-restraint. This unbounded nature of the present and its politicization as a time of crisis also serves to stifle future imaginaries through the fostering of despair. Consequently, as contemporary theories of time argue, the way the future is

expected, projected, and inhabited has a direct impact on the nature of political action (Bazzani 2023).

In focus groups conducted with young people from Tunisia's marginalized interior and peri-urban regions in 2021 and then again in 2023, my co-investigators and I were able to trace how Saied's politics of time has reshaped youth imaginaries of the past and future and their ensuing propensity for political action (Jmal and Lakhal 2024). In just two years, there was a simultaneous rise in authoritarian nostalgia and a fall in the sense of agency over the country's ambiguous and out-of-grasp future. These temporal understandings in turn informed their modes of action. Across the focus groups, youth spoke of divestment from the collective as a sphere of action in favor of self-optimization strategies. In this way, Saied's politics of time is contributing to popular legitimation around the idea of strong-man rule, but also a broader process of demobilization and disengagement from collective action and political life. That being said, the perpetual delay of his vision for the future has also led to increasing frustration with the president himself. Moving forward, a research agenda that centrally considers the politics of time in today's Tunisia could reveal how the construction, narration, and manipulation of temporalities and temporal rhythms act as institutional and cognitive regulators that facilitate authoritarian reproduction. Perhaps, such research could also explore how alternative future imaginaries could carve out spaces and modalities for democratic resilience via a prefigurative future-making process of resistance. ♦

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Roundtable Discussion: The Legacy of the Biden Administration

The Biden Administration, Iran, and the Middle East

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Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's former vice president for strategic affairs and former foreign minister, spoke with CNN's Fareed Zakaria in January 2025 in Davos. During the interview, Zarif said: "if today instead of president Pezeshkian you had president Jalili [Pezeshkian's competitor in the last presidential elections], you might have had a major war going on in the region [the Middle East]" (World Economic Forum, 2025). Zarif's assertion touches upon two issues: the first relates to the regional dynamic in the Middle East, especially after October 7, 2023, and the second to the internal dynamic in Iran.

Both dynamics are interrelated and might be difficult to separate from one another. Iran is a large country with a population over 80 million and an area of 1,648 million km². Iranian authorities, before and after the revolution, have been able to shape and reshape the regional structure of the Middle East. This influence intensified since the revolution because of Iran's ambitious plans to increase its involvement in the region. One way to achieve this was through the creation and support of different armed groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, among others. Therefore, when these groups engage in wars, Iran

becomes involved, directly or indirectly in these wars. However, Iran's internal situation affects the degree of its involvement.

Iran has been ruled by an Islamic regime since 1979. Despite not being democratic, Iran has had many elections since the 1979 revolution. Competition in some of these elections has been intense. Different Islamists, including hardliners, conservatives, moderates and reformists, have participated and competed in these elections for decades.

However, by the end of President Rouhani's second term in 2021, a decision seems to have been taken to exclude reformists and moderates from major institutions, especially legislative and executive bodies. In both cases, the Guardian Council, which is responsible for approving candidates who want to run in elections, prevented them from participating in presidential and parliamentary elections. This created an atmosphere in the country where people saw elections as an ineffective tool for political change since the Guardian Council had the power to exclude certain individuals from participating. Although this is not a new practice, the Council used to approve the candidacy of strong

reformists and moderates in the past such as Hashimi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Hassan Rouhani. However, in recent elections, influential politicians were excluded, giving the impression that the Council “engineered” the elections in favor of the hardliners.

Therefore, many boycotted the 2020 and 2024 parliamentary elections and also boycotted the 2021 presidential elections. In 2020, only 42.5 percent of eligible Iranians voted in the parliamentary elections (Etemad, 1402 [2024]) and in 2024 only 41 percent participated (Donya-e Eqtesad, 1402 [2024]). At the same time, only 48.88 percent of eligible voters participated in the 2021 presidential elections, the lowest since the revolution, compared with 73.33 percent in 2017 (Khabaronline, 1403 [2024]).

Hardliner and conservative politicians dominated both the parliament and the presidency because their bases did not boycott the 2021 and 2024 elections. The same faction controlled the judiciary, and was therefore able to dominate all institutions in Iran. Banning reformists and moderates from running in elections was not the only reason behind the boycott. The failure to improve the economic situation in Iran may have been another reason. People overwhelmingly voted for Hassan Rouhani in 2013 and 2017 with the hope that he would bring change to their everyday lives. However, he was not able to do that, not only because of mismanagement within the country, but also because of external pressures, especially from the US under the leadership of President Donald Trump.

Rouhani and his team, including Zarif and the current foreign minister, Abbas Araqchi, were able to reach an agreement with the international community regarding Iran's

nuclear program, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, which limited Iran's access to nuclear materials and put its program under the observation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). JCPOA was important because it partially opened Iran to the international community, especially to international companies which wanted to invest in the country. Iran's economy improved after the deal. For example, when President Rouhani came to power in 2013, inflation in Iran was over 35 percent but by the end of his first term and after two years of the JCPOA, it was less than 10 percent (Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran). In addition, Iran's oil production increased after 2015 (BBC, 2019). However, these relative improvements in Iran's economy did not last long, because President Trump decided to withdraw from the deal in 2018 and described it as “one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into” (Trump White House, 2018).

There was a chance to revive the deal again when Joe Biden came to office in 2021, before the end of Rouhani's second term, but he did not take this step. This could have been important for improving Iran's economy and sending a message to the Iranian people about the importance of participating in the 2021 presidential election and having a president that wants Iran to be part of the international community. The chance of a moderate being elected were low in that election since the Guardian Council excluded important moderate and reformist politicians and instead approved the candidacy of Abdolnasser Himmati, who was an unknown moderate politician. However, things might have changed on the ground if Biden had taken a step towards rejoining the deal because Himmati tried during his campaign to convince

the Iranian people that he was the right candidate for the job and criticized the hardliners' approach to foreign policy. Nevertheless, the boycott prevailed and brought Ebrahim Raisi, a hardliner, to power.

Despite this, a hardline Iranian president was willing to sit down with the Americans to negotiate the renewal of JCPOA. According to Zarif, the meeting was supposed to be held on October 9, 2023 (World Economic Forum, 2025). The meeting was canceled because of the events on October 7, 2023.

Hope emerged in Iran when the Guardian Council approved the candidacy of Masoud Pezeshkian, a reformist parliamentarian, for the 2024 presidential elections, after the death of Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash. Although the move behind the Council's decision to allow a popular reformist politician to run in the election is not clear, it can be argued that reconciliation was a reason behind this decision. Additionally, the authorities in Iran rely on high participation in elections to project their legitimacy. Since participation in the 2020, 2021, and 2024 elections was low, Iranian officials may have wanted to increase participation rates. However, in the first round, participation was the lowest in the history of the Islamic Republic, at only 40 percent (Khabaronline, 1403 [2024]). But in the second round, when the election was between Pezeshkian and Jalili, participation increased to 49.8 percent (Khabaronline, 1403 [2024]). This means that the authorities at least partially achieved their goal in the second round. When Pezeshkian reached power, the Biden administration had another opportunity to revive the deal. However, it is possible that President Trump would have overturned it again on entering office.

These developments in Iran coincided with

other major events in the region. The first event occurred on October 7th, 2023, and the subsequent war in Gaza, and the second was the fall of Assad in Syria at the end of 2024. Between these two events, other developments took place as well.

Most importantly was the reaction of the Biden administration to all these events. Although Washington was not passive after October 7, it was ineffective. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made numerous diplomatic visits to the region to end the war in Gaza, but he ultimately failed to do so. In the context of the first direct Israeli-Iranian military confrontation, such ineffectiveness could easily have led the region into a major war.

When Rasi was president, Iran retaliated for the attack on its consulate in Syria within four days, while under Pezeshkian it took longer, and it did not retaliate after the last Israeli attack in October 2024. It is true that Iran's decisions about national security are not taken solely by the president, but in collaboration with other institutions, especially the Supreme National Security Council and, most importantly, the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. However, the president can influence decision-making processes regarding war and peace. Therefore, Zarif's argument in his interview with Zakaria in Davos regarding the possibility of a major war in the region could have been true, had a hardliner won the most recent presidential elections.

On the other hand, one could argue that Iranian leaders understood the cost of responding to the latest Israeli attacks. The attacks might have been very harmful to Iran and it therefore did not retaliate. Notably, Iran's leaders understand the importance of restraint. For example, a recent leaked lecture given by a brigadier general in Iran's Revolu-

tionary Guards, Behrouz 'Isbati, who fought alongside the former Syrian government, revealed that Iran neither has the desire nor the ability to engage in a major war in the region. Sabiti indicated during his lecture, when answering a question, that Iran did not want a war with the United States. Most importantly, he asserted that Iran did not have the capabilities to attack American bases in the region (Ensaf News, 1403 [2025]).

However, this does not mean that the Iranians do not want to protect themselves. In the aftermath of October 7, 2023, Iranians have discussed the possibility of changing the country's nuclear doctrine. Since Iran's nuclear program was revealed, it has insisted that the program is for the peaceful development of nuclear energy. There is even a fatwa, or a religious decree, issued by Ali Khamenei asserting that it is forbidden in Islam to build a nuclear bomb. However, since Iran's sovereignty was violated by Israel's attacks, and since its influence has weakened because of Assad's fall, some may have concluded that it is time for Iran to change its nuclear doctrine.

Different factions within the Islamic Republic might support this option to protect Iran against the possibility of future military actions or attempts to topple the current regime by a foreign adversary. Although not all politicians support this option, including Rouhani (Rouhani Hassan, 1403 [2024]), the fact that there is a discussion over this option is a significant shift in the country regarding the program. This might not have been the case, had the Biden administration been able to restrain the Israeli prime minister from directly attacking Iranian territory or escalating the situation in Gaza. Iran might have always wanted to obtain a nuclear bomb, however, the fact that Iranians are now discussing acquiring the bomb is a significant change in

the discourse within the country. Therefore, any shift in Iran's approach to its nuclear program is a result of two American presidents: Biden and Trump. The first for his hesitation in returning to the JCPOA and the other for his "maximum pressure" policy on Iran.

Negotiations with Iran are not easy and different domestic and foreign factors are often at play. It is possible to argue that given the war in Gaza, neither the Biden administration nor the Iranian government were able to successfully negotiate reviving the JCPOA, however, a stronger reaction from Biden towards the war in Gaza might have changed things on the ground. First, Israel might not have attacked Iran, and second, some Iranian officials might not have felt that having a nuclear bomb could be an option to protect their country and regime. ♦

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A Story about Ruin: Biden's Effort to Integrate the Middle East

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In his spring 2021 speech, “A Foreign Policy for the American People,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlined the new administration’s strategic vision. Responding to the experience of the pandemic and Donald Trump’s America First populism, Blinken (2021) sought to connect US policy goals to domestic concerns about economic recovery and protecting democracy. The Middle East is mentioned only in passing and Israel not at all. The *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* published at the time emphasized the coming struggle of democracies against autocracies (Biden 2021). It includes Biden’s mantra about “our ironclad commitment to Israel’s security” and the US goal of seeking Israel’s “integration with its neighbors” (Biden 2021, 11). It also warns, “We do not believe that military force is the answer to the region’s challenges, and we will not give our partners in the Middle East a blank check to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values” (Biden 2021, 11), but appears to refer to Saudi Arabia, not Israel.

While the Middle East was not expected to be a major focus of US foreign policy, nearly four years later – with over 1000 Israelis and 50,000 Palestinians killed, the military capacity of Hizballah decimated, and the Iran-backed regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria overthrown by (former) Jihadists – President Joe Biden would end his term by boasting

about the “diplomatic and geopolitical opportunities we’ve created” including “a new moment for a more stable, integrated Middle East” (Biden 2025). He declared, “our adversaries and competitors are weaker, and we have not gone to war to make these things happen.” The legacy of the administration’s policy in the Middle East, however, will not likely be defined by this view of artful diplomacy and goals achieved. Rather, its legacy will rest on how Biden’s unconditional backing of Israel in its post-October 7 wars left Gaza in ruins and paved the way for President Donald Trump, soon upon taking office, to call for the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians.

How did this happen? Alexander Ward’s reporting about the first two years of the Biden administration suggests the limited role the Middle East was expected to play. Ward observes, “The administration didn’t want to get bogged down in the Middle East” (cited in Beck 2024, 20). Ward records a source telling him, “We’re really not going to get involved in Israel–Palestine” (cited in Beck 2024, 20). To the degree they did, they embraced the Abraham Accords and Trump’s pro-Israel shifts while claiming to support a “viable” two-state solution.

Biden’s approach to the Middle East was not one of “retreat.” In November 2021, when

National Security Council coordinator for the Middle East Brett McGurk spoke at the Manama regional security summit, his message was, “The US is not going anywhere.” He outlined a “back to basics” strategy that emphasized strong US security commitments to its traditional regional allies (McGurk 2021). McGurk noted that the US would never again stand by when a “friend” gets exposed to fire, as Saudi Arabia did in 2019. US Central Command announced the maintenance of a strong US military force posture in the region. This approach was expected to contain and deter regional rivals such as Iran, allowing the Biden administration to focus on other regions.

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the stakes of great power competition rapidly expanded. Biden undertook a high-profile visit to meet Arab leaders in Saudi Arabia, telling them, “We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran” (cited in Sanger and Baker 2022). US diplomats and military commanders warned regional allies of the security risks of increasing trade and economic ties to China. The National Security Strategy published in October 2022 declared, “The post-Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next” (Biden 2022, 6). But it also noted, “We have too often defaulted to military-centric policies underpinned by an unrealistic faith in force and regime change to deliver sustainable outcomes” and “We will not use our military to change regimes or remake societies” (Biden, 2022, 42, 43).

As US efforts focused on getting Saudi Arabia to sign a normalization agreement with Israel and expanding regional economic and security integration, US National Security Advisor

Jake Sullivan could assess in late September 2023 that “The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades” (cited in Beckerman 2023). It seems clear the Biden administration was unprepared for the brutal Hamas-led assault into Israel on October 7, 2023, killing over a thousand Israelis and taking over 200 hostages back to Gaza. Mirroring similar shifts after 9/11 and the Soviets’ detonation of their first atomic weapon, US threat perceptions were transformed, leading to a more assertive, and at times reckless, approach.

Israel’s ferocious retaliation against Hamas in Gaza led to the spread of intense regional conflict, exposing the limits of the Biden administration’s approach to the Middle East. The US recommitted to backing Israel militarily and deploying more of its own military assets to the region to deter attacks against US forces and its regional allies. For almost a year, US officials appeared to hope for an end to the hostilities so it might return to promoting regional security and economic integration. But Biden held back from applying the required pressure on Israel to accept a sustained cease-fire while likely violating US law by continuing arms shipments (Borger 2024). US officials took credit for preventing a total Israeli blockage of humanitarian aid to Gaza. Meanwhile, Israel continued its destructive campaign in Gaza with so much unrestrained force and with seeming disregard for the civilian population that it was soon accused of war crimes and genocide (Albanese 2024, Amnesty 2024). The military commanders of Hamas responsible for the October 7 attacks, now dead, were also charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity (International Criminal Court 2024).

Meanwhile, key regional US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt feared the

consequences of Israel's actions for Palestine and the region. The extent of the physical destruction and human suffering in Gaza, as well as parts of Lebanon, horrified Arab societies, fostering networks of Palestinian solidarity and challenging efforts to promote further normalization with Israel (El Kurd 2024). In recent years, less concerned about the threat of Iran, most Arab states have sought to dampen the effects of regional turbulence by limiting their involvement in armed conflicts, de-escalating regional rivalries, and attempting to rebuild political order within war-torn states. While they view Iran as a threat, most Arab states wish to avoid a more polarized region and have sought ties with Israel as part of the broader diversification of their security relationships and arms suppliers. The ongoing conflict, however, forced them to suppress pro-Palestinian demonstrations and strained their relations with Israel by exposing differences over the future of Palestine.

In contrast to the efforts of Arab states, Israel's extensive, multifront military campaign has sought to eliminate the capacities of rival non-state actors and their main state backer, Iran (the so-called "Axis of Resistance"). While waging its campaign against Gaza, Israel also continued bombing sites in Lebanon as well as Hizballah and Iranian targets in Syria and Houthi targets in Yemen. A year later, once the bulk of Hamas's military capacity was eliminated and Gaza laid in ruins, Israel escalated its conflict with Hizballah with an extensive campaign targeting its leadership, weapon stores, supply infrastructure, and eventually people and buildings across Lebanon that Israel viewed as associated with any aspect of Hizballah. With the success of Israel's campaign in Lebanon, the opportunities to advance US goals seemed to change. As *Politico* reported, "Behind the scenes,

Hochstein, McGurk, and other top U.S. national security officials are describing Israel's Lebanon operations as a history-defining moment — one that will reshape the Middle East for the better for years to come" (Banco and Toosi 2024). By the end of 2024, Israel's devastating campaign had eliminated what Hizballah had long touted as its deterrent capability, debilitated it as an organization, and inflicted so much damage on Lebanon and its people that the group agreed to a ceasefire before there was one in Gaza. As a result, Iran has been forced to reconsider its forward defense strategy and might consider the nuclear option. Responding to the strategic failure and trauma of October 7, Israel not only claimed to restore deterrence by denial but to drastically shift the regional balance of power, enabling a new regional order based on Israel's regional military dominance (Rachman 2024).

With the success of Israel's military campaigns and the rapid collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, in early 2025, the outgoing Biden administration spoke about the new opportunities to forge a "more integrated region and security architecture" created by the shift in the regional balance of power (Blinken 2025). But such efforts fail to recognize how these states lack a common understanding of regional security and differ sharply with Israel and the US about the terms for Palestinian security. While the US has insisted on an Israel-centered approach to regional security, such a vision is likely unsustainable even with expanded normalization agreements. Israel continues to maintain its own exclusive security concerns and strategic approach, leading it to reject Palestinian self-determination, seek to maximize its regional military dominance and deny accusations of genocide. More broadly, the US-backed devastation to Palestine, as well as

Lebanon, might leave a long-lasting mark on the political perspectives of Arab societies, posing challenges to normalization as well as to the US role in the region and regimes dependent on it for security. The most immediate consequence of Biden's failure to balance a focus on Israel's security and its war effort with recognition of Palestinian security was to enable Trump's "'jaw dropping' plan for the United States to 'own' Gaza, remove its Palestinian population and redevelop the enclave as a new Mediterranean Riviera" (DeYoung 2025). The lessons of Gaza echo those of Omar El Akkad's (2018) dystopian novel *American War* that draws on his reporting in the post 9/11 Middle East to imagine a future where southern states have again rebelled against the United States, leading to decades of violence, destruction, and cruelty. As the narrator explains, "This isn't a story about war. It's about ruin." ♦

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The Biden Legacy in the Middle East

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In January 2020, President Joe Biden succeeded Donald Trump, one of the most controversial presidents in U.S. history. The bar, in short, was low. Biden's main asset, at first, was simply that he was not Donald Trump. This echoed an earlier transition when Barack Obama succeeded George W. Bush, the architect of the disastrous 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Obama had barely been in office before receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, signaling mainly international hopes for his administration and relief that the Bush days were over. That same sense seemed to accompany Biden at first, and for good reason. Trump's first administration seemed to be a source of constant chaos, while Biden was widely perceived as a calming influence, as stabilizing the US role in the world, and essentially as an adult having finally entered the room.

At first, these expectations seemed warranted. Trump had presided over a weakening economy and chose to deal with a catastrophic healthcare crisis – the global COVID pandemic – as some kind of partisan affair best handled as though it was a reality TV event. Biden, in contrast, showed something that Trump never had: empathy. Biden's administration then presided over the most successful vaccine rollout and distribution system in US history, and openly talked about helping the country to heal. It is not surprising, therefore, that many expected similar depths

of empathy regarding US policy toward the Middle East, only to be deeply disappointed, to put it mildly.

In the Middle East, Trump largely ignored some longstanding regional allies, like Jordan, in favor of a de facto close alignment with the regimes in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. He seemed to handle US Middle East policy as a personal affair between rulers and openly disdained regional expertise. Trump's other policies in the Middle East included ending the US role in the Joint Comprehensive Plan for Action (JCPOA -- the multilateral nuclear arms deal with Iran), cutting off US aid to UNRWA (the main aid organization supporting Palestinian refugees), while also moving the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and recognizing the longstanding Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights. Trump also claimed credit for a series of normalization agreements between Israel and Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan – known as the Abraham Accords. Upon taking office, Biden maintained most of these policies, but he did attempt – unsuccessfully – to revive some sort of arms deal with Iran, while restoring funding to UNRWA. Although Biden, too, would later halt US aid to UNRWA following the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel.

The gap between the Trump and Biden foreign policies was perhaps more pronounced outside the region, as Trump had derided major institutions and alliances from the United Nations to NATO, and had withdrawn the US from the Paris Accords on climate change. Biden, in contrast, saw US power and influence as predicated on a multilateral coalition of Western democracies, and hence restored support to the UN, NATO, and other regional and global institutions, while also re-joining the global treaty to address climate change. This is especially important because Biden's major departures from the Trump years were based on deep beliefs in multilateralism, institutional cooperation, and, above all, a commitment to global norms – at least as these were defined by the dominant Western powers in the international system. Yet here, too, the Middle East didn't seem to be included. While Biden restored and repaired damaged alliances across Europe and North America, his administration failed dramatically when it came to these same “shared norms” in the Middle East.

As the Israel-Hamas war dragged on for months, and then well over a year, the death toll was staggering and appalling, and the continuing U.S. rhetoric about global norms, the rule of law, and international human rights seemed that much more jarring and tone-deaf given the humanitarian disaster that was unfolding in Gaza. To say that the Gaza catastrophe tarnished the Biden legacy would be a profound understatement. It seemed to contradict everything the administration claimed to stand for, and it may even have cost Biden's designated successor, Vice President Kamala Harris, the 2024 election.

In a farewell speech, Biden harped on many successes – record improvements in increased levels of employment, a revived

economy, and bipartisan legislation to invest in infrastructure projects in all 50 US states. He defended his administration's extensive support for Ukraine in its war with Russia. Perhaps that should have been the start of a positive presidential legacy. But Biden also unwittingly seemed to have paved the way for the return of Trump, who immediately took a hammer to almost every Biden domestic or foreign policy, to US democratic and legal institutions, and to regional and global organizations. Rather jarringly, Trump seemed determined to undermine US allies especially, stoking diplomatic crises and trade wars with Canada, Mexico, and even Denmark (as the US president demanded that it hand over Greenland).

In his first few weeks, however, Trump turned to Gaza. In January 2025, Hamas and Israel had finally agreed to a fragile ceasefire. Both Biden and Trump claimed credit for the temporary respite. But there was little to celebrate. Gaza lay largely in ruins. More than 50,000 people had been killed in Israeli bombing, the overwhelming majority innocent civilians.

Biden was supposed to be “not Trump” and mark the end of the Trump years as the bridge to a new era at home and abroad. Instead, the Biden legacy turned out to be a mere interregnum between the first and second Trump administrations, with the latter having none of the (admittedly few) guard rails that may have slightly reined in the first. It thus overshadowed any of the positives, in both domestic and international policy, that Biden felt should be his legacy. And for the Middle East, the legacy seemed to be forever dominated by Gaza, even as further disaster continued to unfold. ♦

Joe Biden's Legacy in the Middle East

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Complicity in genocide is the Biden administration's primary legacy in the Middle East, in addition to discrediting US claims to support human rights and uphold a "rules-based international order" (Amnesty International 2024, Human Rights Watch 2024, UNHCR, 2024). Joe Biden's support for Israel's devastating war on Gaza, in response to the horrific October 7, 2023 Hamas-led attacks on Israel, also resulted in the most negative attitudes toward the US by Arab publics in living memory, even worse than during the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq. The Biden administration's acquiescence to Israel's seemingly intentional effort to make Gaza uninhabitable also made possible Donald Trump's shockingly illegal proposal to depopulate the territory to create "the Riviera of the Middle East" without Palestinians (Viser, Alemany, and Birnbaum 2025). Although Israel's war on Lebanon and Hezbollah and military engagement with Iran significantly weakened two US adversaries and facilitated the Assad regime's fall in Syria (removing a longtime Iranian ally), the Gaza war simultaneously strained Egypt and Jordan, two vulnerable American allies, while heightening regional tensions. Biden's policies have been disastrous for Palestinians, Lebanon, and America's standing in the Arab region, but they have not been a qualitative departure from decades of US support for Israel at the expense of Palestinians and international law amid policies

that produce greater instability for the region and insecurity for its inhabitants.

Joe Biden entered office with no interest in deepening US involvement in the Middle East. In fact, when he became president, some Arab rulers were concerned the US was "withdrawing" from the region (Kaye 2021). Like Obama and Trump before him, Biden wanted to reduce America's entanglements in the Middle East, a legacy of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, to focus on what Obama had sought but failed to fully achieve: a pivot to Asia in an era of increasing strategic competition with China. Biden mentioned the Middle East while campaigning for office, but mainly to criticize Trump. He called out Trump's support for Mohammed bin Salman after US intelligence agencies determined the Saudi Crown Prince likely directed Jamal Khashoggi's gruesome 2018 assassination (Trump refused to release the intelligence report about the killing and later boasted that he "saved his [MBS'] ass") (Moreni 2020). Biden vowed to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" while also promising to get tough on Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi because of his abysmal human rights record. Trump's description of Sisi as "my favorite dictator" (Youssef, Salama, and Bender 2019) prompted Biden to tweet, "No more blank checks for Trump's 'favorite dictator.'" One year into office, Biden's National Security Adviser, Jake

Sullivan, claimed that “Joe Biden has made human rights a central feature of our foreign policy” (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). (Sullivan later wrote, a few days before October 7, 2023, that the Middle East “is quieter than it has been for decades,” before boasting that the administration had “de-escalated crises in Gaza and restored direct diplomacy between the parties after years of its absence” (Sullivan 2023).¹

Whether human rights have ever been “central” to American foreign policy is questionable, but the pretense became less tenable after Russia’s March 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the resulting spike in oil prices and inflation felt by American consumers. Biden’s frosty attitude toward bin Salman warmed as he traveled to Jeddah in July 2022 to meet the crown prince and other Arab leaders and asked the kingdom to increase oil production (Biden’s request was rebuffed).

Biden’s shunning of “Trump’s favorite dictator” also ended a few months later, in November 2022, when he chose to attend COP 27 in Sharm El Sheikh and meet Sisi on the sidelines of the climate summit. Although the administration said the president would raise human rights and the fate of Egypt’s most prominent political prisoner, Alaa Abdel Fattah, during the visit, Biden left Egypt with Abdel Fattah in prison and no improvement in the human rights scene (Viser and O’Grady 2022). Predictably, other policy issues - oil, the Ukraine war, the optics of environmental advocacy, and later, Egypt’s mediation efforts during the Gaza War - were prioritized over human rights.

Biden’s full-throated support for Israel’s genocide in Gaza in response to the Hamas-led

attacks on October 7, 2023, which killed approximately 1200 Israelis (including at least 809 civilians, 68 foreign nationals, and 314 Israeli military personnel) and resulted in approximately 252 hostages, irreparably damaged US standing in the region and discredited American claims to support international law or universal human rights (UNHCR June 10, 2024). By April 2025, Israel’s war had killed over 50,000 Palestinians (including more than 15,000 children), injured over 113,704, and resulted in massive destruction to the territory’s hospitals, schools, universities, housing, and roads, making much of Gaza “uninhabitable,” most likely intentionally (OCHA, 2025). Seemingly endless US arms shipments, in violation of US law (Blaha 2024, Kirchgaessner, 2024), continued American justifications for Israel’s attacks, including on civilians, and multiple American vetoes of UN Security Council ceasefire resolutions, contrasted with US denunciations of Russia’s war on Ukraine, sanctions on Moscow, and an outpouring of Western empathy for Ukrainian civilians, led many to call out American and Western “double standards.” Such hypocrisy discredited US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s frequent invocation of a “rules-based international order.” After Gaza, many concluded the US made the rules, lectured others to follow them, criticized adversaries for not doing so, and disregarded the rules for itself and its allies.

US Standing in the Region

The Biden administration’s support for Israel’s war had predictable consequences on Arab public opinion. Arab Barometer polling in Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Morocco in late 2023 and early 2024 indicated that the US standing among Arabs “de-

¹ The online version of the article was subsequently edited after the October 7, 2023 attacks to remove these claims.

clined dramatically.” “In four out of five countries ... fewer than a third viewed the United States favorably.” The war also “reduced support for normalizing ties with Israel from already low levels.” Michael Robbins, Amaney Jamal, and Mark Tessler concluded that increasingly negative attitudes toward the US meant “not only risking the support of Arab leaders but also jeopardizing the domestic stability of the United States’ key Arab allies” (Robbins, Jamal, and Tessler 2024).²

Other polls produced even more negative findings. An Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies survey of 8000 people in fifteen Arab states, the West Bank, and Jerusalem conducted around the same time found that 94 percent of respondents “considered the US position [on the war] negatively.” The US was viewed as the country that posed the “biggest threats to the peace and stability of the region,” followed by Israel, and 76 percent “reported that their position [on the US] had become more negative.” The percentage of respondents opposed to recognizing Israel also increased from 84 to 89 percent, including a jump from 38 to 68 percent in Saudi Arabia (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2024).

A third poll in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine conducted in October 2023 revealed “the lowest favorability ratings for America in ... more than twenty years” and that US trust and influence “had reached its lowest point historically.” The poll also indicated “a concurrent ... growth in attitudes that have helped fuel past ISIS, Al-Qaeda or even militia terrorism recruitment” (Dagher and Kaltenthaler, 2023). Although impossible to definitively conclude that US support for Israel’s war in Gaza will produce a spike in terrorism against the US and US interests

in the region (over and above the hundreds of attacks on US forces in Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea since October 7, 2023), it should come as no surprise if terrorism against the US increases in the coming period (Rodriguez and Couvillion 2024).

An Emboldened, Expansionist Israel

Biden’s support for Israel, coupled with its military success against Hezbollah and Iran and an even more supportive Trump administration in Washington, further emboldened Israel to act aggressively in the West Bank, Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza. Soon after the January 2025 Gaza ceasefire, Israel undertook military operations in the West Bank. Approximately 40,000 Palestinians were displaced, some permanently, from Jenin, Tulkarem, and other refugee camps, “the highest [number] since Israel occupied the territory” in 1967 (AbdulKarim and Kingsley, 2025). Nor had the West Bank been spared violence during the Gaza war, with at least 46 Israelis, including 19 soldiers, and over 900 Palestinians killed in the territory since October 7, 2023 (Goldenberg 2025 and UNRWA 2025).

Israel also seized territory in both Lebanon and Syria during this period. Immediately after the Assad regime’s collapse in early December 2024, Israel occupied more Syrian territory beyond the occupied Golan Heights while carrying out 480 strikes on Syrian military facilities and equipment (Krever 2024). And since the November 2024 ceasefire with Lebanon, Israel has erected five military outposts in southern Lebanon, prompting serious concerns about when, or if, it will evacuate newly occupied territories in both countries.

² The authors also noted that “the United States’ loss has been China’s gain.”

Israel also blocked all humanitarian aid, goods, and fuel from entering Gaza at the beginning of March 2025 in an effort to pressure Hamas to accept Israel's proposed extension of phase one of the ceasefire, with the continued release of hostages, rather than moving to phase two, which would have ended Israel's military presence in Gaza in anticipation of the territory's reconstruction in phase three. Two weeks later, on March 18, Israel restarted the war, and in early April, Israel's defense minister declared that it would "seize large areas" of Gaza "to be added to Israel's security zones to protect our fighting forces and communities" (Cheeseman and Loveluck, 2025).

An emboldened Israel, with the backing of both the Biden and Trump administrations, has continued to act with impunity and in violation of international norms and law, resulting in a situation that seems certain to produce greater turbulence in the future.

Conclusion

Biden's complicity in Israel's genocide and Gaza's destruction also made possible Trump's outlandish proposal to displace Palestinians from the territory based on the logic that Gaza is now "uninhabitable" because of the scale of destruction, the dangers of unexploded ordinance, and the time it will take to rebuild the territory. While some in Netanyahu's government and Israel salivate over such a possibility - even establishing a Defense Ministry "Bureau for Voluntary Emigration" "to facilitate safe and supervised" passage of Gazans to target countries" - we cannot fail to describe such proposals for what they are: illegal and morally repugnant plans for ethnic cleansing (Lis and Kubovich, 2025). Whether Trump's Gaza proposal is executed or not, it appears very likely that Israel will annex all

or part of the West Bank while Trump is in office, only fueling further regional instability.

There were, of course, other important Biden administration policies that I have not discussed for reasons of space, including the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and how some regional allies perceived this, prompting concern the US was "withdrawing" from the Middle East; failure to reestablish an Iranian nuclear deal after Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Protocol of Action (not entirely the Biden administration's fault); and the administration's fixation with securing Saudi-Israeli normalization without addressing the question of Palestine. In fact, the administration's obsession with Saudi-Israeli normalization without progress on Palestinian-Israeli peace was not only misguided but also directly contributed to Hamas' motivation to launch the October 7 attacks on Israel to derail such efforts. And so far, Hamas has succeeded, at least for the time being. ♦

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