

A SYSTEMIC OVERVIEW OF THE COMPETITION FOR REGIONAL HEGEMONY



Middle Eastern Game of Thrones

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קבוצת ראות
Reut Group

15 October 2020

10 Tishrei 5781

A Systemic Overview

The Game of Thrones for Regional Hegemony in the Middle East

The purpose of this document is to present a general overview of the systemic ties of the leading Middle Eastern countries, and their allies, presently striving for regional hegemony. The paper also offers a basic assessment and implications of these rivalries on Israel's national security.

This document inaugurates a new project of the Reut Group, which aims to assist Israeli leadership more successfully navigate the ever-changing landscape of the Middle East from a national security perspective. The Reut Group is utilizing a unique package of theory, methodology, and technology, which helps us make sense of the various complex and inter-connected events, as well as to better conceptualize the new reality.

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Executive Summary:

The competition for regional hegemony and Israel's national security

1. **The Middle East is currently experiencing a period of tectonic shifts in the regional balance of power, further intensified by American withdrawal from the region.** This trend has increased the appetite and audacity of regional powers to promote their interests and create networks of ad hoc collaborations and alliances between rivals.
2. **The competition for Middle Eastern hegemony can be divided into four regional blocs with contrasting agendas and ideologies, each with its own proxies, loyal local militias, and mercenaries.** These blocs include: 1) Iran and the Shia Axis; 2) Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood Axis; 3) pro-Western Sunni Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt; and 4) jihadism, most identified with the Islamic State, which is witnessing a downward trend. Russia, which maintains a significant foothold in the region, is tremendously impacting this balance of powers.
3. **Iran and its proxies continue to pose the greatest regional threat to Israel.** Iran invests considerable resources in order to surround Israel with a “ring of fire”, despite its deep-seated economic crisis. To reword Kissinger’s statement about Israel, it actually appears that Iran has no domestic policy, only a foreign policy.¹
4. The attempt to conceptualize the Iranian war plan against Israel, which we will refer to as a “borderless open war”, raises the following principles:
 - **The firing of tens of thousands of missiles from a geographical area that stretches from Iran and Yemen to the Gaza Strip and through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, over several months,** during which Israel is unable to end or contain the situation, or even defend itself against so many high quality targets located over such an expansive area.
 - **The “ring of fire” is intended to, first and foremost, enable Iran to deliver a conventional “second strike” in the event its nuclear program is attacked.**
 - **Nevertheless, the “ring of fire” infrastructure also provides Iran with the option of a conventional “first strike”, which Iran believes could lead to Israel’s collapse.** The acquisition of nuclear weaponry would provide Iran immunity from a significant, external attack and would also theoretically prevent Israel from using such weapons in response to an attack orchestrated by Iran. In the eyes of the Iranians, the combination of damage to the home front and the country’s functional continuity in the long term would ultimately lead to immigration and Israel’s collapse.
5. **Meanwhile, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood axis are essentially taking a pragmatic, practical approach towards Israel at this point, where the Jewish nation is not at the top of their agenda. However, Turkish aspirations for regional hegemony are making the escalation between Israel and Turkey almost inevitable in the future.**
6. **This document warns that, in the next significant round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, the danger of an unprecedented escalation and clash between Israel and Turkey is likely.** Turkey has altered its approach in recent years. The country is currently intervening militarily in the conflicts across the region, most notably in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey seeks to uphold the banner of the Palestinian struggle and even granted Turkish citizenship to exiled Hamas leaders. **It is not certain at all that Turkey will be satisfied with its heretofore rhetorical opposition to Israel during next rounds of fighting with Hamas.**

¹ The famous quip of Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State under President Nixon, goes: “Israel has no foreign policy, only a domestic policy.”

7. **Israel also faces the threat of “regionalization” of the conflict.** It seems that the most likely ultimate threat scenario for Israel would be a fight on two fronts, one against Hamas in Gaza and the other against Hezbollah in Lebanon. **In fact, however, a more threatening scenario is for the Gaza front to become a regional front with the active involvement of two claimants to the regional throne - Iran and Turkey - and their cooperation with one another.**
8. **Turkey and Iran’s pursuit for hegemony has created ongoing friction and tension between them.** Their activities in Iraq and Syria and, more recently, that of Turkey in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, have resulted in nearly direct contact with one another. All of this must be understood within the historical context of the hostility between Sunni Islam, represented by Turkey, and Shia Islam, represented by Iran.
9. **Nevertheless, there are effective mechanisms for dialogue between the two countries, as well as overlapping interests. Support for Hamas is the most prominent of these overlapping interests.** Hamas, which was born as a Gazan proxy of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, is supported on one side by Turkey and Qatar, and by Iran and Lebanon on the other. Hence, there is a greater potential for “regionalization” of the conflict between Israel and Gaza, following the next significant escalation.
10. **Despite the image of Russian strength, Moscow has limited influence in the region.** Russia is taking advantage of the United States’ withdrawal to better establish itself in the region, but it lacks the capabilities (and intention) to effectively replace the American presence. Russia has no natural allies in the region and even its influence on the Assad regime is limited. Nevertheless, Russia has managed to become a key player and even a mediator in Syria and, and to a lesser extent, in Libya.
11. **Russian interests continually conflict not only with those of Israel, but also with the interests of Turkey and Iran.** Russia usually tries to avoid confrontations with Israel, but the potential for friction is high due to Israel’s military efforts against Iranian entrenchment in Syria, which hampers Russian ambitions to lead the economic and military reconstruction of the country.
12. **Although both Democrats and Republicans support American withdrawal from the Middle East, there is no doubt that decisions made in Washington regarding the region have a greater impact than those made in Moscow.** Thus, after the presidential elections, US policy towards Iran and ties with Turkey and Saudi Arabia (issues on which the presidential candidates are deeply divided) will have a profound impact on the regional balance of power.
13. **Israel’s diplomatic accords with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are strategic, and better its position in dealing with the gamut of regional threats. Israel’s status will likely be upgraded, making the Jewish state, in effect, a member of the bloc of moderate Arab states.** The main interest of this axis is to stymie Turkey and Iran’s pursuit for regional hegemony. The multiplicity of players and the absence of a clear hegemon in this bloc has led to ad hoc coalitions on various issues. Israel was involved and invested in some of these issues even before the peace agreements.
14. **The peace agreements may indeed herald a reversal of Israel’s status in the Middle East.** Apart from the potential security, political, and economic benefits, the taboo against “normalization” with Israel in the Arab world has been shattered. In fact, the Arabic word for “normalization” once had derogatory connotations. Now, however, it is used frequently and

unabashedly by Arab leaders. This is an important and courageous move on part of these leaders with the potential to break down the psychological barriers which have so far prevented Israel's integration into the region.

15. **The Palestinian issue has been pushed aside - for now.** It seems that Arab countries have lost interest in the Palestinian issue and are no longer even bothering to pay lip service to the subject. Israel's diplomatic achievements during the Trump presidency are perceived as a Palestinian defeat, which received, at best, a weak response from other Arab nations. The refusal of the Arab League to condemn the United Arab Emirates following its peace agreement with Israel, when compared to the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab League for several years following its historic 1979 peace agreement, testifies to how great the change has been regarding the Palestinian issue.
16. **However, Israel could pay dearly in future for failing to manage the conflict with the Palestinians.** Although the issue seems to have paused for a "commercial break", it is still a strategic issue of enormous importance for the future of Israel, and will certainly continue to create ongoing challenges for the country.
17. **For example, following the internal process of Palestinian reconciliation led by Turkey, and in view of the Palestinian sense of abandonment by the Arab League, the 'Palestinian ball' could land permanently in the court of the Turkish Axis, instead of the coalition of Arab states.** This could have significant implications for the conflict, which will be discussed in future documents.

Summary: The Middle East's Game of Thrones

	Who?	Goals and Motivation	Modus Operandi	Israel
Iran and the Shia Axis	Iran and its Shia proxies in Lebanon (Hezbollah), Iraq (Shia militias that form part of the Popular Mobilization Forces, such as Iraqi Hezbollah), Syria, Afghanistan (Fatemiyoun Brigade), Pakistan (Zainebiyoun Brigade), Yemen (the Houthis), Bahrain (Al-Ashtar Brigade) and the Gaza Strip (Islamic Jihad, Sabireen Movement and support for Hamas); the Syrian regime is also an important part of the regional Iranian mosaic.	Iran seeks to influence regional processes, to export the Islamic revolution, and to defend the regime and the country. The ideological component of Iran's considerations is especially dominant and is expressed in the flow of funds to regional proxy organizations, even in times of deep-seated economic crises at the expense of the Iranian people.	An aggressive hybrid fighting doctrine involving Shia militias and mercenaries, and support for resistance organizations, plus the deployment of welfare and relief services. Iran has given new meaning to Shia identity in the Middle East. Iran is succeeding in changing the demographic balance in Syria. Areas from which Sunnis have been expelled are becoming Shia territory.	The ambition to destroy Israel is one of the cornerstones of the regime, and a declared goal of the Axis of Resistance. The Iranians are trying to create a "ring of fire" in order to implement a borderless open war through the firing of tens of thousands of rockets from a geographical area including Iran and Yemen and up to the Gaza Strip within a long period, during which Israel won't be to effectively defend itself.
Turkey & Muslim Brotherhood Axis	In recent years, Turkey has succeeded in forming a coalition with the Sunni current of political Islam that is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar is a key player in this coalition, which also includes Government of National Accord in western Libya , and other political organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.	The basis for this coalition is the ideological foundation propagated by the Muslim Brotherhood, which seeks to establish an Islamic Caliphate. However, the movement demonstrates pragmatism in realizing its vision. Economic motivations are key for Turkey. Underlying Turkish policy is a worldview that seeks to challenge the existing global order. Turkey aims to thwart Kurdish nationalist aspirations in Syria.	Turkey is pursuing an aggressive and defiant foreign policy towards global superpowers. It has a "security buffer zone" in Syria and is militarily active in Libya, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, and Somalia. It is undermining Greek sovereignty in the Aegean Sea and maritime zones in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean.	Under Erdogan, Turkey is exhibiting increasing hostility towards Israel and is positioning itself as one of leading proponents of the Palestinian cause & Hamas. Nevertheless, the country is still demonstrating pragmatism and, at the moment, Israel is not at the top of the agenda for this axis. However, Turkish aspirations for regional hegemony make the potential for escalation between Israel and Turkey a near certainty.
The Moderate Arab Axis	Moderate and Sunni pro-Western states that include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Sudan, as well as (at times) the Arab countries of North Africa.	An aspiration to maintain the "old order" in the Middle East, which aims to contain the hegemonic efforts of non-Arab elements (i.e. Turkey and Iran) and to protect the stability of regimes being challenged by radical Sunni Islam.	A coalition of coalitions. A multiplicity of the players with the lack of an effective head to lead the coalition, which is often led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and even sometimes the United States.	With Israel's political agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, Israel's status is expected to be upgraded to the point where it practically becomes a member of the moderate Sunni Arab bloc. Another goal of the moderate Gulf states is to try to gain the sympathy of the American public. In their view, rapprochement with Israel serves this purpose.

Iran & the Shia Axis: Building the Infrastructure for a ‘Borderless Open War’

Who?

1. **In the last decade, Iran has constructed an interconnected web of influence, based upon the Middle East’s Shia populations by moving around proxy organizations, terrorist groups, local militias, and mercenaries.** Iran transports, supports, and operates organizations in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen, and Bahrain. In practice, Hamas and the Sunni Islamic jihad are also part of this bloc. The ties between Iran and these organizations differ in each arena, as does their degree of identification with Iran and the rivalry between the host countries and Iran.²

Goals and Motivation

2. **Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has sought regional hegemony** through the acquisition of economic, military, and political power that would enable it to influence regional processes on the basis of the recognition of its status as a leading state on the international stage. The country has sought to export the revolution within the framework of national security in order to protect the country and the regime. The ideological component that is particularly strong in Iran’s considerations in striving for hegemony is exhibited in the flow of funds to regional proxy organizations, even in times of deep-seated economic crises at the expense of the Iranian population.
3. **The most important proxy is undoubtedly Hezbollah in Lebanon, which has built an economic network of drug trafficking and money laundering worldwide based on the global Shia community.** This makes Hezbollah a significant player of utmost importance, which would survive even if the regime in Iran collapses.³

Operational Characteristics

4. **Iran has developed a doctrine of aggressive and asymmetric hybrid warfare through the operation of low-level Shia militias.** This allows Iran to advance its aims and act against its foes in a way that does not drift into conventional warfare. This method also keeps armed conflicts beyond its borders. Alongside these actions, Iran continues to advance its nuclear ambitions and build a ballistic missile array.
5. **Iran has succeeded in injected new meaning into Shia identity and thus effectively harnessing Shia populations to its advantage.** For example, the origins and behaviors of Iraqi Shias are very different from those in Iran.⁴ Yet, despite this, Iran has managed to establish a foothold there. Furthermore, the Houthis in Yemen belong to the Zaidi branch of Shia Islam, which differs from the Twelver (Imamiyyah) branch dominant in Iran. The principle of resistance, i.e. muqawama, has become a leading theological principle and its broad interpretation has made it possible to form alliances beyond the Shia crescent, particularly (and conspicuously) with Palestinian Sunni groups.

² For a broad overview of Iran’s networks of influence, see The International Institute for Strategic Studies, **Iran’s Network of Influence in the Middle East**, November 2019

³ Listen to the podcast (in Hebrew) of Nitzan David Fox, [The Cartels - Hezbollah Ltd.](#), 19 October, 2018.

⁴ Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, Princeton University Press, 1994

Attitude towards Israel

6. **The desire to destroy the State of Israel is once of the cornerstones of the regime.** Evidence of the centrality of destroying Israel is demonstrated by Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, who wrote a 400-page book on the subject called "Palestine".⁵
7. **Strategy: Building a "ring of fire" around Israel in the move towards a "borderless open war".** In addition to more than 150,000 missiles held by Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as the ammunition held by Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, Iran is investing significant efforts to build a missile system targeting Israel from a vast geographical area, which includes Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This effort also includes existing missile precision projects by Hezbollah and the Palestinian organizations, as well as other projects to develop cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles. Senior members of the Axis of Resistance sometimes use the term **"borderless open war"**. By analyzing quotes from Khamenei's book and statements from other senior officials, as well as examining the actions undertaken by Iranians in the region, it is possible to mold substance into this concept and outline the theory of Iranian force against Israel on the day of reckoning:
 - **In the first stage, the purpose of building the "ring of fire" surrounding Israel is defensive.** The intention is to deter Israel and the United States from attacking Iranian nuclear facilities.
 - **On the day of reckoning, tens of thousands will be fired at Israel every day from a geographic area that stretches from Iran to Yemen and up to the Gaza Strip,** targeting the country's population centers and imprisoning Israel in a ring of fire for a period of months.
 - **Israel lacks the ability to determine, contain, and defend itself from such an attack.** It is now clear that, despite its strategic superiority, the IDF has no conventional ability to prevent missiles fired at Israel even from the Gaza strip or Lebanon. In theory, the only way to stop this comes with the heavy cost of physically occupying territory. However, Israel does not have a theoretical option when the potential for the threat extends throughout the Middle East.
 - **Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will also prevent the theoretical possibility of such weapons being used by Israel in response to an Iranian attack.**
 - **The Iranian strategy is based on the working assumption that Israel will not be able to tolerate a protracted conflict that will harm its home front and functional continuity.**⁶For the Iranians, the weak social fabric of Israeli society will eventually lead to its collapse.⁷
 - **The war between Iran and its affiliates will also have a global dimension and may have unprecedented implications for Jewish communities outside Israel.** Iranian and Hezbollah networks are spread throughout South America, Europe, and other locales. These networks logistically exploit Shia populations across the world, and may

⁵ Ali Khamenei, Palestine, Publications of the Islamic Revolution, 2015 (see [here](#) in Persian).

⁶ Tamir Yedi, [Taking the First Step: The Transformational Story of the Home Front Command](#), Between the Poles 20-21, The Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies, July 2019

⁷ Khamenei, 205.

attack Jewish communities. In fact, they have already proven that Jewish communities are legitimate targets.

- **By means of “the campaign between the wars”, in recent years, Israel has been trying to thwart the vicious “ring of fire” that is beginning to encircle it, especially in Iraq and Syria, as well as other countries outside the Middle East.**

Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood Axis: ‘Erdogan is the solution’

Who?

8. **In recent years, Turkey⁸ has succeeded in forming a coalition with the Sunni current of political Islam affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.** Qatar is a key player in this coalition, which includes the Government of National Accord in western Libya, and other political organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar’s considerations and interests are not always in line with those of Turkey. These differences are not addressed in this document.

Goals and Motivation

9. **The basis for the coalition is the ideological foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood, which seeks to establish the Islamic Caliphate.** This is in line with the movement’s slogan in Egypt - “Islam is the solution”. Nevertheless, it reveals the pragmatism in the implementation of this vision. In the view of Erdogan, Turkey aspires to be the leading figure in the Muslim world with the intention to protect the oppressed and weak. The first step in realizing the vision of the Islamic Caliphate requires a rehabilitation of Arab and Islamic countries, in accordance with Islamic law.
10. **Alongside this Islamic identity, pan-Turkic solidarity also influences Turkey’s patterns of operation throughout the region,** as can currently be seen in the country’s military assistance to Azerbaijan, a majority Shia nation that speaks a Turkic language.
11. **Underlying Turkish policy is a worldview that seeks to challenge the existing global order.** Turkey is striving for regional hegemony without the involvement of Western powers, and challenges the hegemony of the five permanent members on the UN Security Council. Turkey’s conduct continues to create friction with both the United States⁹ and Europe.
12. **The regional foe of Turkey is Egypt,** following the country’s overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 by the army general Abdel Fattah al-Sissi. Erdogan even provides asylum to the heads of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey. Another major point of friction between the two nations is Libya, where Turkey supports the UN-backed and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Government of National Accord in western Libya. Egypt, and other eastern Mediterranean nations, supports the Libyan National Army, which is led by General Khalifa Haftar.

⁸ For an excellent overview of Turkish aspirations and considerations, refer to: Ephraim Inbar, Eran Lerman, Chai Eitan Cohen Inrojek “[Turkey as a major challenge for Israel \(and its neighbors\) in the 21st century](#)”, Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, September 2020.

⁹ For example, Turkey’s decision to purchase the advanced S-400 missile system from Russia has created tensions with Washington and led to Turkey’s removal from the F-35 joint strike fighter program with the United States. Furthermore, the frequent threats to flood Europe with immigrants only escalates tensions with the European Union.

13. **One of Turkey's central goals is to stymie Kurdish nationalist aspirations in Syria and Turkey.** In order to achieve this, Turkey is undertaking domestic measures, as well as efforts in Iraq, to root out the bases of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a Syrian-Turkish Kurdish Marxist organization. Turkish leadership is also working to achieve this aim in Syria by relying directly on Sunni militias. Yet, at the same time, Turkey maintains very cordial relations, including extensive trade ties, with the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is situated in the country's north.
14. **Turkey's economic crisis is a major motive for its regional behavior.** Although at the beginning of Erdogan's rule Turkey enjoyed economic prosperity, today, the Turkish lira is crashing, investors are fleeing the nation, national companies have become insolvent, the cost of living continues to rise, and the country's external debt is growing. In an attempt to cope with these crises, Turkey aims to obtain available long-term energy by taking over oil and gas reserves that pass through the eastern Mediterranean basin. Hence, the country is building up its navy.

Operational Characteristics

15. **In order to pursue regional hegemony, Turkey is undermining the regional balance of power.** Turkey has a "security buffer strip" and is militarily active in Libya, Iraq, the Persian Gulf (via a military base in Qatar), and Somalia. The country hosts Hamas networks and infrastructure and conducts defiant activities against Israel in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Turkey is undermining Greek sovereignty in the Aegean Sea and has signed a Memorandum of Understanding regarding maritime zones with the western Libyan government, which threatens Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Italy. The agreement has also raised tensions between Turkey and France.
16. **Turkey's activity in the region brings it into constant friction with Iran (in Iraq and Syria) and Russia (in Syria and Libya).** There have been numerous efforts to contain tensions among the three countries - Russia, Iran, and Turkey - that make up the "Astana Process" talks on the Syrian conflict. However, so far, despite the tensions, competition, and various points of contention, the three countries have generally managed to maintain a delicate balance. For example, while Turkey competes with Iran for influence in Syria, it still helps Iran circumvent US-imposed sanctions. Meanwhile, while Russia and Turkey are on different sides of the Libyan conflict, they hold joint patrols in Syria.
17. **Turkey is gradually adopting Iran's operational characteristics.** For example, like the Iranian Basij Forces, Erdogan is working to form a militia loyal to his party. He has even allowed neighborhood watch organizations to carry weapons. In Turkey's regional activities in Libya, Erdogan even relies on loyal Sunni militias from Syria, not dissimilar from Iran's use of loyal Shia militias.

Attitude towards Israel

18. **Under Erdogan, Turkey is exhibiting increasing hostility towards Israel and is positioning itself as one of leading proponents of the Palestinian cause.** Since the 2010 flotilla incident¹⁰, Erdogan himself has frequently attacked Israel and talked about the liberation of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Erdogan was at the forefront of opponents against the peace agreement between Israel, and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.
19. **Similar to perceptions of the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey has adopted virulent anti-Semitic rhetoric, far beyond what can be described as "criticism of Israeli policy".** The Turkish media do not tire of propagating various anti-Semitic tropes.

¹⁰ A senior diplomat at the Turkish embassy in Jerusalem told one of the authors of this document that Erdogan had first decided to declare war.

20. **Turkey mainly provides support to Hamas on the basis of solidarity, which reflects their common ground and Muslim Brotherhood origins.** Turkey hosts and even grants citizenship to exiled Hamas leaders in a very public way. Turkey also defiantly operates in East Jerusalem and supports Hamas-affiliated institutions in the city. **The potential for contemporary “entanglement” is related to the “peace and reconciliation process” between Fatah and Hamas, which has been promoted under Turkish auspices.** The rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah may not only give legitimacy to Hamas in the West Bank at the expense of the Palestinian Authority, but also in the international arena. Any Israeli attempts to hamper reconciliation efforts could put Israel and Turkey on a collision course.
- Nevertheless,
21. **Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood maintain a practical approach towards Israel.** Turkey continues to maintain diplomatic ties with Israel, similar to the Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt during which the former President Mohammed Morsi did not sever his country’s relationship with Israel. Furthermore, Turkey continues its trade and aviation ties with Israel.
22. **At the moment, Israel is not at the top of the agenda for this axis.** Turkey is more concerned with the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria, the struggle for control of the eastern Mediterranean (particularly against Greece), the civil war in Libya, and, more recently, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.
23. **Turkish aspirations for regional hegemony make escalation with Israel a matter of time.** Turkey’s growing support for Hamas, increasing military involvement in the region, and tensions in the eastern Mediterranean, which threaten Israel’s gas pipeline, come together with the the ruling party’s hostility towards Israel. This situation only produces flammable vapors, liable to ignite into an unexpected crisis at any moment.

The Moderate Arab Axis (and Israel!)

Who?

24. **The moderate Arab coalition is made up of numerous moderate and pro-Western Sunni states, led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt.** This bloc also includes Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Sudan, and, at times, the North African Arab nations. In light of Israel’s normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, Israel may pivot from its status as an “external observer” to an active member within this bloc.
25. **The Moderate Arab Axis largely coalesced in light of fears of the Iran and Shia Axis, as well as opposition to the Turkey and Muslim Brotherhood Axis and the Global Jihad Axis.** The “ideology” that unites these states is the aspiration to maintain the “old order” in the Middle East, to contain the hegemonic efforts of non-Arab elements (i.e. Turkey and Iran) in the Middle East, and to protect the security and stability of regimes being challenged by Islamist forces.
26. **The axis was formed in the face of the growing weakness of Arab states¹¹ and the overarching Arab bloc.** The international weight of countries in the region has decreased with the dramatic decline in oil prices and the discovery of new energy deposits outside the

¹¹ The Arab system is being challenged both by external and internal pressures. Nations artificially created by the 1916 British-French Sykes-Picot Agreement, namely Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, are being challenged in an era in which local and regional forces are growing on religious, ethnic, and/ or tribal bases, continually challenging local and national governance, institutions, and sovereignty. Contributing to this is the inability of Arab states to provide their citizens with even the most basic needs.

region. In an attempt to garner sympathy from the American public, some of these countries have come closer to Israel in the past year.

Operational Characteristics

27. **A coalition of coalitions.** Unlike the other contenders for the crown of regional hegemony, the moderate axis has no leader, but rather a number of dominant states that set the tone and agenda, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and, until recently, the United States. This pattern, combined with the multiplicity of players in this axis and their broad geographical distribution, means that the common denominator of these actors is very narrow. Hence, in practice, regional or issue-specific coalitions are formed on an ad hoc basis. Examples include the “Arab Coalition” led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen;¹² an Arab-American coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria;¹³ a coalition of the Arab Axis in Libya;¹⁴ a bloc of forces policing the Persian Gulf;¹⁵ and the eastern Mediterranean camp.¹⁶

Attitude towards Israel

28. **The fear of Iran led to a cooperation of Israel with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf nations over a decade ago. This cooperation has paved the way for the latest political developments and agreements.** Israel’s steadfast position towards Iran, exemplified by the Jewish state’s operations against Iran’s nuclear ambitions and aspirations in Syria, have led to the rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf states. The United States disengagement from the region has created the need for the Gulf states to update and upgrade their ties with Israel. **Normalization with Arab countries has broken long-standing taboos that have prevented Israel’s economic and social integration in the region. Thus, it is possible that Israel is on the cusp of a new era in the Middle East.**

¹² This coalition was formed to support the exiled Yemeni government and affiliated local militias against the Iranian-backed Houthi minority’s takeover of the country. This initially involved a large number of nations, including Sudan and Egypt, which sent symbolic forces to Yemen, as well as Pakistan, which provided the Saudi Air Force with skilled pilots. However, this coalition slowly began to disintegrate. Last summer, the United Arab Emirates announced that it was withdrawing its troops from Yemen.

¹³ The multinational force to combat the Islamic State was established in 2014 by the United States in Iraq and Syria. This joint force primarily consists of US military personnel. However, troops from 30 other nations are also represented, including a large presence of forces from the Moderate Arab Axis. The forces mainly provided air support to Kurdish forces, the Iraqi Army, and the Free Syrian Army.

¹⁴ The dominant players in the coalition include Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which support General Khalifa Haftar, head of the eastern-based Libyan National Army. The LNA is supported by France and Russia, while the UN-recognized western-based Government of National Accord is backed by Turkey, Qatar, and Italy.

¹⁵ The principal axis of power is concentrated in the United States and the Gulf monarchies. Israel is also apparently a partner in this bloc.

¹⁶ Given Turkish expansionist aspirations in the Mediterranean, Egypt and Greece are leading a bloc of countries opposed to Turkish demands, including Cyprus, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates.

The Great Powers: The Russian bear extends its claws, while the American sheriff exits

29. **The United States' diminished presence in the region during the Trump era¹⁷, as well as what was perceived to be an abandonment of its traditional regional allies¹⁸, has led Middle Eastern nations to create new networks of alliances** in order to reduce dependency on Washington or to take advantage of this new reality. Nevertheless, the United States remains a critical player in the region and many countries are awaiting the results of the upcoming US elections before deciding whether to change their regional policies. **The United States "passing the baton" to its allies includes strengthening and arming these very allies so that they can defend themselves without American intervention, as well as a deepening their ties with Israel.**
30. **Russia is taking advantage of the United States' withdrawal, but is not trying to overtake America's position.** Russia lacks the resources to effectively replace the United States and is not trying to change the region or impose its own values. Moscow accepts the region as it is. Russia is aiming to achieve the status of a mediator for all regional actors that could use its services. Apart from the Assad regime, Russia has no natural allies in the Middle East. However, it has managed to become a key player in Syria and, to a lesser extent, in Libya. It works with all regional players, including the regional powers of Turkey, Iran, and Israel. Yet, at the same time, Russia is in constant friction with them.¹⁹
31. **Russian involvement in the region is meant to position itself as a global power on par with the United States, one that succeeds where the United States fails.** The characteristics of this involvement also stem from Moscow's desire to better its bargaining position in the face sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union following Russia's occupation of parts of Ukraine. **Thus, one of the central "principles", which characterizes Russia's regional approach is to simply undermine American Middle Eastern interests and objectives.**
32. **Nevertheless, despite the image of Russian power in the region, Moscow maintains limited influence over its allies.** For example, Russia has not been able to push Shia militias away from the Syrian-Israeli Golan Heights border, as it has promised Israel. Nor has Russia been able to successfully hold sway over the Turkish intervention in Idlib, Syria. Russia even maintains limited influence over the Assad regime. Moscow's attempts to compel Bashar al-Assad to make peace with his cousin, Rami Makhlouf, have failed.
33. **Russia has political, economic (namely energy and arms sales), and security interests in the region.** In Syria, where Russian involvement is deeper than any other Middle Eastern country, Russia is aiming for an arrangement that will enable it to lead Syria's economic and military reconstruction, in addition to gaining effective control over the areas still under rebel control. The Middle East is also a potential market for Russian arms, as well as a theater for the purposeful display of new weaponry.

¹⁷ The gradual American withdrawal from the Middle East is supported by both Democrats and Republicans and is based on a desire to end the United States' role as the global sheriff. This withdrawal began during the administration of President Obama and intensified during that of President Trump, a proponent of isolationism, best exemplified by the "America First" slogan. The United States' achievement of energy independence, thanks to the use of oil shale, accelerated this Middle Eastern withdrawal, which became less of a strategic interest in a short amount of time.

¹⁸ The decline of American commitment to its traditional allies has been reflected, among other things, in the lax response to the Iranian attack on Saudi Aramco's oil facilities, as well as America's hasty announcement of its withdrawal from Syria and the abandonment of Kurdish forces there.

¹⁹ For more information, see the series of podcasts on Russia's involvement in the Middle East: [Babel: Translating the Middle East, Center for Strategic and International Studies](#)

34. **Russian interests continually conflict not only with those of Israel, but also with the interests of Turkey and Iran.** This is especially true of Israel's operations against Iranian bases in Syria, which is an obstacle for Russia to lead Syria's economic and military reconstruction. Russia lacks the orderly processes of determining national interests through governmental institutions. Rather, they are ultimately determined by Putin and sometimes accompanied by power struggles with the Ministry of Defense. This explains the core difficulty in rationally predicting Russian conduct in the Middle East.²⁰
35. **Overall, Russia tries to avoid a confrontation with Israel. Nevertheless, there is a high potential for friction.** Despite the low point in 2018 when Russia blamed Israel for the downing of a Russian plane following an Israeli attack in Syria, coordination between the two players still manages to strike a delicate balance. Hence, although Russia deployed S-300 anti-aircraft missiles in Syria, it does not allow the Assad regime to use them against Israel.

What impact does this all have on the conflict with the Palestinians?

36. **Recent political agreements demonstrate that the Palestinian conflict is no longer an insurmountable obstacle in improving Israel's geostrategic regional position.** Up until recently, one of the factors that has been a barrier for Israel in improving its regional ties is the Palestinian issue and specifically, the Arab Peace Initiative. At the time, this initiative was considered a true breakthrough in that it practically recognized Israel and ensured broad regional normalization upon the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, since this initiative did not offer a solution to the fundamental problems and structural failures underlying the Israeli-Palestinian political process, such as the failure to reach a consensus regarding the Palestinian right of return, the Arab Peace Initiative soon became another obstacle in changing the dynamics of the conflict.
37. **Arab states seem to be fed up with the Palestinian issue. It is no longer viewed as an issue supported by political capital and legitimacy for the rulers of some Arab nations.** The refusal of the Arab League to condemn the United Arab Emirates following its peace agreement with Israel, when compared to the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab League for several years following its historic 1979 peace agreement, testifies to how great the change has been regarding the Palestinian issue.
38. **The Palestinian issue is less burning at the moment. However, Israel may still pay a heavy price in the future for failing to manage the conflict with the Palestinians.** The demographic variables and basic working assumptions of the conflict have not changed, and the conflict will continue to pose a strategic issue of immense importance to the future of Israel, undoubtedly creating ongoing challenges.
39. **The Palestinian ball may permanently land in Turkey's court.** While Hamas has long enjoyed the support of both Iran and Turkey, the PLO and the Palestinian Authority have seen the natural "home" of the Palestinian issue among other Arab states. However, the Palestinian feeling of abandonment by the Arab League following Israel's peace agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, may lead the PLO to align with Hamas regarding Turkish patronage on the Palestinian issue, consequently hastening Palestinian reconciliation efforts. These developments may have significant implications on the conflict.

End.

²⁰ For example, despite the economic crisis that Russia is experiencing, the behavior of Russian gas and oil companies in the region, which are controlled by the Kremlin, are influenced by geopolitical considerations. Several years ago, Putin initiated a series of projects in this field that simply do not make sense economically, such as a project to transfer gas through Turkey in order to bypass Ukraine.

Terms

The Middle East's Game of Thrones	Competition for hegemony in the Middle East between three primary axes: Iran and the Shia Axis, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood Axis, and the Axis of Moderate Sunni Arab States.
Borderless Open War	The Iranian war plan for Israel based on the creation of a “ring of fire” surrounding Israel, which will allow the Iranians to launch tens of thousands of missiles to Israel from a geographic area that stretches from Iran to Yemen up to the Gaza Strip. This plan will last for a period of months, in conjunction with the Palestinian uprising, with Israel lacking any effective defensive capabilities. This “ring of fire” is primarily intended to allow Iran to strike a conventional “second blow” in the event of an attack on its nuclear capabilities. It also opens the option for a “first blow” military option, which will lead to significant damage to Israel's home front and the country's functional continuity. In Iran's view, given the weak fabric of Israeli society, such an attack could lead to Israel's collapse.
The danger of a “regionalization confrontation” with Hamas	A scenario in which Gaza, in a significant military confrontation with Israel, becomes a regional front in which the two claimants to the regional throne - Iran and Turkey - are actively involved and cooperating, to some degree, against Israel. Hamas, which was born as a Gazan affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, is supported by Turkey and Qatar on one side, and Iran and Hezbollah on the other.

