



Debating American Primacy in the Middle East

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.

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Debating American Primacy in the Middle East

Marc Lynch

How has America's support for Israel during its brutally destructive war on Gaza affected American primacy in the Middle East? It is possible to tell two very different stories. By one narrative, America's policy towards Gaza has done irreparable harm to its standing in the region, stripping away all moral legitimacy and exposing its disregard for human rights and international law as well as its contempt for Palestinians and for the Arabs who identify with them. By another narrative, the United States has managed to navigate the crisis effectively and strengthened its position in the region, showing its willingness to pay costs to support its ally Israel while maintaining or even improving almost all of its core alliances in the region and revealing China's impotence. By the first account, Gaza may herald the endgame for America's Middle East, by the other it has opened up new opportunities to promote Arab-Israeli normalization and to prevent global rivals such as China from gaining any further foothold in the region.

These narratives map on to very different theories of international order. America's stance on Gaza, and the broader long-running debate about emergent global multipolarity and American retrenchment from the region, open up a critically important window into the policy implications of different theories of international order. Those questions, already central to evaluations of the Biden administration's regional policy, take on great urgency as Donald Trump returns to the White House with unclear ambitions for the region. In September 2024, POMEPS and the Mershon Center for International Studies at the Ohio State University convened a workshop with regional experts and international relations theorists to debate the nature of American primacy in the Middle East. The papers in this collection range widely over theoretical approaches and empirical examples to bring out the assumptions and implications of different perspectives. The discussions were shaped by the shadow of Israel's war on Gaza, in all of its moral and strategic dimensions, with sharp disagreements over the extent to which this

represented a fundamental break with or continuity with prior trajectories.

The workshop papers engage some of the most important policy issues for America and the Middle East, but we began from questions of International Relations theory. How should we think theoretically about a regional order like the one America has built in the Middle East? What is the nature of American primacy, and how has it changed – if at all – over the last few decades? As Simon Mabon and I argue in our forthcoming book, *Region-Making and Order in the Middle East*, evaluating American primacy really depends on the theory of international order one adopts, and which metrics are the most relevant signals of regional standing. One core distinction is between an order based on *material power* (or the perception thereof) and one based on some form of *normative legitimacy*. A second core question is whether the international order is defined by *anarchy* or – as a growing literature represented in this collection by Daniel Nexon and Stacie Goddard would suggest – by *hierarchy*. And a third is whether the primary focus should be on states or on *regimes* and the broader political realm and publics within which they struggle for power and survival.

First, material power. The American Middle Eastern order was established by the end of the Cold War and America's crushing defeat of Iraq in 1991, which established for a generation that no regional power or international rival could withstand its military predominance. That perception lasted until the American defeat – or at least long struggles – in its attempted occupation of Iraq after 2003; there is fierce disagreement today as to whether that reputation has been re-established in the intervening years. US officials frustrated by the perception of American decline or retrenchment in the region often point to the relatively stable troop levels and unchanged military basing as evidence that nothing substantial has changed once the unnatural and temporary occupation forces in Iraq went

home. No other global power has the ability or the will to intervene militarily in the ways the United States can and does – a reality underscored by Chinese passivity in the face of Houthi threats to Red Sea shipping.

But perceptions matter. Arab officials were impressed by the juxtaposition between American refusal to intervene directly in Syria in 2013 and Russia's ability to decisively intervene in support of the Assad regime in Aleppo in 2015. Perhaps none of them really believed that Russia had become more powerful than the United States, or would prefer to have Russian weapons systems over American, but the difference in outcomes made an impression. Similarly, the Trump administration's decision to not retaliate against Iran for the 2019 drone attack on the Abqaiq oil refineries shocked Gulf leaders who had assumed that any president – not just the most hawkish in recent memory – would at least come to the defense of oil. Few doubted that the United States could defeat Iran if it came to war – but all-out war was not the world in which they pursued security and influence.

There's another issue with material power in the Middle East. What threats, exactly, do regional powers expect the United States to be able to deter or defeat? Most Arab regimes are focused above all on the survival of their own regimes, as Gause and Ryan remind us. And those regimes have been deeply, fundamentally shaped by their embeddedness in the American security order, as Peter Moore graphically demonstrates in the case of Jordan in ways that clearly apply to the Gulf, Egypt, and other regional allies. America's security relationships are equally economic ones, as Zaynab Quadri points out, with petrodollar recycling and arms sales creating their own incentives independently of actual security concerns. The Obama administration's cautious embrace of revolutionary change in Egypt and elsewhere in the region in 2011 set off every possible alarm bell for these regime security obsessed leaders. Forget about external threats – if the US couldn't, or wouldn't, save them from popular uprisings then what exactly was the purpose of the alliance? China could appear more useful and less threatening, as Ulrichsen and Benabdallah remind us, with its offers of

long-term investments without conditions or expectations around human rights or democracy.

Second, norms. Constructivist (and English School) approaches would suggest (see Goddard and Gause in this collection) that no international order can be truly hegemonic without commanding some degree of consent and legitimacy. Material power is not enough without the ability to mobilize shared purpose. What makes an international order different from just the balance of power, which is necessary for a move up the ladder of primacy from domination to hegemony, is the sense of normative rightness which binds it together. America's Middle East is normatively justified by a discourse of moderation and order, in which the United States and its allies push for peace and stand against Iran and other resistance actors which threaten violence and stand for fundamentally different values. If the United States fails to support its allies or to live up to its stated ideals, or if it abandons the pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace, this can provoke a crisis of order in which the loss of shared purpose – rather than the loss of material power – drives defection and challenges from within. American policy on Gaza could be seen as such as departure, as the generally accepted bias towards Israel turns into something darker and less acceptable to the Arab states within the alliance.

Who judges whether and when there has been a loss of normative consensus, though? What matters more, public opinion or regimes – particularly when they differ over core priorities such as Palestine. There has always been a profound gap between Arab rulers and publics on the relationship with the United States and the regional order it sustains – especially, but not exclusively, when it comes to Palestine and Israel. As Dana El Kurd points out in this collection, that gap has always been a key reason for the American preference for autocracy over democracy. It is generally understood, or at least believed, that more democratic states in the Middle East would be more responsive to anti-American and pro-Palestinian public opinion (though the example of Mohammed el-Morsi's brief tenure as the elected president of Egypt offers food for thought, as he proved quite comfortable maintaining

the Camp David peace treaty with Israel and playing Hosni Mubarak's traditional role in brokering a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel).

What is new, it seems, is not public hostility to American policy but the degree to which we also now see a gap between Arab rulers and the United States. During the Obama years, almost every American ally – Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and more – firmly opposed almost all of his key policies, from supporting democratic transitions to refraining from direct military intervention in Syria to negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran. The Biden administration found almost no takers among its regional allies for its demands that they join the Western states and the 'rules based international order' to support Ukraine against Russian invasion – with Saudi Arabia, in particular, actively helping Moscow on oil pricing. Arab leaders have complained virtually continuously since 2011 of their fears, and resentments, of perceived American retreat from the region almost independently of anything the US actually did. Those complaints came in part because of the utility of such complaints for extracting new resources, weapons systems, and commitments from Washington, but there can be little doubt that at least some of the resentments and fears were genuine. The real question today is whether those doubts play out differently in a multipolar era than they did when Washington enjoyed clearer primacy.

The return of Donald Trump to the White House may seem likely to continue what many see as a pattern of sudden, extreme changes in American foreign policy in the Middle East. That seems unlikely at one level, as Peter Mansoor suggests in his contribution. Every president has been committed to Israel's security, and while they have varied in their degree of interest in pushing for a Palestinian state none has come close to delivering one. Every president has been committed to protecting the Arab Gulf states and ensuring the flow of oil and has presided over a regional order based on a tacit partnership between Israel and most Arab states against Iran and other forces of "resistance." No president, with the partial exception of Obama in 2011, has meaningfully pushed for real democratic change or prioritized human rights – at least in part because

Arab public opinion has been virtually constantly fiercely hostile to the United States. And every president, since the costs of the catastrophic invasion of Iraq became clear, has attempted to avoid major new wars and to reduce America's presence in the Middle East in order to refocus on global threats such as a rising China – and been met in response with questions from its regional allies about the strength of US commitments. Biden, rather than moving away from Trump's signature policies of maximum pressure on Iran and Arab-Israeli normalization, instead doubled down on both.

But for all this continuity, there is a widespread perception that the global system has shifted from unipolarity to some form of multipolarity. Since 1990, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the American leadership of the war to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, the United States has been in a dominant position within the region. In contrast to the Cold War years, as Richard Herrmann reminds us in his contribution to this collection, where regional powers could play Washington and Moscow off against each other, since 1991 all roads have led through Washington – at least until recently. Today, as discussed by Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Elham Fakhro and Peter Salisbury, and F. Gregory Gause III in this collection, many believe that the global system is moving towards multipolarity and an erosion of American primacy. China (see Lina Benabdallah in this collection) and Russia (see Herrmann) have each in their own way challenged the exclusive American claim on regional leadership, while regional powers – particularly in the Gulf (see Fakhro and Salisbury, Curtis Ryan, and Gause) – have become more independent in their foreign policies and less willing to defer to American preferences. The Trump administration's determination to destroy USAID and all forms of foreign aid (except for Israel and Egypt) seems likely to accelerate this decline and further hasten in a new era of multipolarity.

We are delighted to present POMEPS Studies 54: *Debating American Primacy in the Middle East* and hope that it helps to reframe and sharpen the critical ongoing debates about US foreign policy, global order, and the Middle East.

U.S. Strategy in the Middle East as a 21st Century Cold War Gains Steam

Richard K. Herrmann, The Ohio State University

Part 1: Introduction

The war in Gaza stems from a local conflict between Israel and the Palestinians that has for decades been linked to broader regional and global strategic concerns. During the Cold War, early U.S. efforts to contain communism by aligning with Arab nationalism gave way to a reliance instead upon Iran, Turkey, and the Arab monarchies in the Gulf against the Arab nationalist republics (Egypt, Syria, and Iraq) that aligned with the Soviet Union and posed a rejectionist front vis-à-vis Israel. By the end of the 20th century, that configuration had changed dramatically; Egypt had left the front, Iran had turned against the United States and Israel, and the U.S.S.R had dissolved. In the first decade of the new century, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became subordinated in American eyes to the global war on terror and the war in Iraq. The intra-Arab power balance tilted in favor of the Arab Gulf monarchies, and the subsequent Arab Spring weakened Egypt and sent Syria into civil war. Russia and Iranian intervention saved Assad's government in Damascus but did not prevent Israel from bombing as it saw fit in Lebanon and Syria.

The Israeli government long framed the contest as one that pitted the Western world and civilization itself against Iran and its proxies. Over the last decade, that frame has globalized, with the local Israeli-Palestinian conflict increasingly framed in Jerusalem and Washington as part of the broader contest between China and Russia on the one hand, and the United States, NATO, and Israel on the other. This framing made drawing the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia into an axis that would include Israel, India, and the United States (I2 – U2 plus Saudi Arabia) an obvious strategic objective.¹

The attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023, intensified the debate in the United States over what

should be done to obtain Riyadh's participation in this. Those in favor of a two-state solution for local reasons argued that the Iranian threat and the growing strategic threat from China made moving now toward the recognition of a Palestinian state essential.² Doing so, they believed would make it easier for the leadership in Riyadh to establish normal relations with Israel while managing popular domestic affinities with the Palestinian cause. Those opposed to a two-state solution for local reasons, including those in the ruling coalition in Israel, argued the way forward was not to make concessions to Arab nationalist or Islamist sentiments; to the contrary, the route ahead should be to destroy the residual strength of the resistance front. This would involve rooting out Hamas in Gaza, weakening Hezbollah's position in Lebanon, and demonstrating to all that Iran did not have the wherewithal to defend them, or even to defend itself from Israel's escalation dominance, and that neither China nor Russia would come to their aid with the instruments of power needed to make a difference. In this strategy, pursuing total victory through the demonstration of overwhelming superior force would create a bandwagon Saudi Arabia could get on, as it might have been headed toward prior to October 7, 2023. If it chose to stand aside, then so be it. The United States and Israel, and the West more broadly, would defang the Iranian threat anyway and close ranks as the global East versus West contest intensified.

There is an alternative strategic perspective that does not revolve around strengthening an axis designed to confront Iran and prepare for a 21st Century Cold War, but it had few proponents in Washington even before October 7. Senator Bernie Sanders has proposed a "revolution in American foreign policy" that would look for ways to defuse a new Cold War and feature diplomacy to avoid a war with Iran.³ In the academic world, Jeffrey Sachs has proposed to downplay the Cold War contest in the Middle

East, emphasizing instead economic development, human security, and climate change.⁴ Paul Pillar has spelled out how this would mean dampening rather than deepening the conflicts between Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁵ Perhaps in the Obama era these ideas would have found more supporters in Washington, but over the past ten years American views have grown more hawkish, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The crackdown on protests after the death of Masha Amini in Iran highlighted Tehran's deplorable human rights record, further alienating progressives once open to a less confrontational approach. Iran's support for Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine erased most residual sentiments running in that direction. The MASHA Act condemning Iran and imposing more sanctions passed the House by a vote of 410 to three with 20 not voting. The \$95 billion foreign aid package sending money and arms to Ukraine and Israel that also strengthened old and added new sanctions on Iran passed in the House 366-58 and in the Senate 79-18. President Biden signed both in April 2024.

While the U.S. focuses on conflict, China has been working to facilitate a rapprochement between Iran and the U.A.E., which re-established relations in 2022, and Saudi Arabia, which re-established relations in March 2023. The emphasis on economic development and the downplaying of long-standing fears and grievances served Iran's efforts to pursue commercial arrangements while the target of Western sanctions. China is Iran's largest trade partner and along with other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can do a lot to provide Tehran an economic lifeline. The rapprochement also fit with Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision. It might mitigate some of the Iranian threats to the 2030 vision and further solidify Riyadh's positive relationship with Beijing. China is Saudi Arabia's largest trade partner, with Riyadh importing from China nearly twice as much as from the United States and more than from Germany, Japan, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom combined.⁶ Similarly, China is the U.A.E.'s largest trade partner and imports more than three times as much from it as it does from the United States. Clearly, strengthening its ties to these oil exporting states also benefits China.

The progress made toward instantiating the aspirations announced in the Iranian-Saudi Arabian détente, as with the American-led Abraham Accords, has been less than hoped for and stalled significantly by the war in Gaza.⁷ The attack on Israel by Hamas and the subsequent Israeli retaliation has once again put into stark relief the tradeoffs leaders in Jerusalem, Riyadh, and Tehran face. The threat of a wider regional war intensifies perceptions of threat, fuels effort to deter, and stokes demands for revenge. The prospects for either building a pro-West axis or a cross-Gulf rapprochement depends on how determined the great powers are to push their agenda forward, which will partly depend on the importance they attach to threats posed by each other and the role they see the Middle East playing in that contest. It will also depend on how leaders and publics in the key regional states read the trend lines across the Arab - Israeli divide, within the Arab world, and across the Gulf.

Part 2: A 21st Century Cold War and the Middle East

In the 21st Century Cold War, as in the 20th Century version, oil is at the center of geostrategic attention to the Middle East. The interdependencies, however, have evolved in ways that change calculations. The threat American leaders saw in the last century derived from the asymmetric dependence on Middle East oil. The U.S. and its NATO allies were more dependent on this source of energy than the Soviet Union, which was self-sufficient in this regard. The fear was that Moscow directly, or through a proxy, could disrupt the flow of oil, holding it hostage to blackmail NATO states. This made the projection of U.S. power to the region central to the broader global contest. It also fueled heavy investment in the Shah's Iran; Four Star U.S. General Robert Husyer's primary concern at the time of the Iranian revolution was that Ayatollah Khomeini was a Soviet proxy or would quickly become one.⁸ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan shortly thereafter turned what had been a country the United States had almost no interest in previously into a Cold War priority for the same reason.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the threat of a hostile great power holding the flow of oil hostage receded.

Attention shifted to the threat Iran posed in this regard. Initially, the George H.W. Bush administration planned to meet this threat with U.S. military forces that could be rapidly deployed to the region, the anti-Iranian posture of the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) that included Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and North Yemen, and security cooperation with Saudi Arabia and states in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait made the ACC's existence short-lived, leaving the United States reliant on forward deployments and the GCC, but this would be enough given the Iranian threat to oil was never as severe as the threat posed by the Soviet Union. Iran's military capabilities were fewer, and it also needed to sell oil to sustain its economy, meaning that disrupting oil shipping would be a self-defeating strategy for Iran.

The constellation of dependencies on Middle East oil when it comes to the great powers is notably different than in the last century. Most importantly, China depends on Middle East oil as much as NATO states do and appears to be interested in preserving its stable flow – a need for peace that may underlie the rapprochement Beijing continues to encourage between Iran and the GCC states. Russia's invasion of Ukraine also led to significant changes in global oil dependencies. China benefitted notably from the oil and gas that Russia redirected its way at discount prices. In 2023, Moscow provided close to 20% of China's imported oil, but, nevertheless, around 50% still came from the Middle East with Saudi Arabia providing 15%, and Iraq, the U.A.E, Oman, and Kuwait the rest.⁹ China is investing heavily in nuclear and renewable sources but these are not yet available at the scale Beijing needs, so it remains heavily dependent on coal and has become the world's largest importer of oil.¹⁰ Consequently, China's primary interest in the Middle East is likely to be insuring the stable flow of oil.

European NATO states significantly reduced their purchase of oil and gas from Russia, making them more dependent on other sources, including both the United States and the Middle East. Russia might still be able to benefit vis-à-vis NATO by threatening to disrupt the flow,

but if it moved this way it risks alienating China in ways it cannot afford to do. Moreover, Moscow has sought to cooperate with Saudi Arabia and OPEC + to manage the global supply of oil and its price. While at war in Europe and wrestling with Western economic sanctions, Russia is hard pressed to forego the sale of oil or divert the necessary military assets to threaten its flow in the Gulf.

Both China and Russia have deepened their strategic military cooperation with Iran in the past eight to nine years, after they had tailed off in the first fifteen years of this century -- largely because Iran moved to become more self-sufficient in the production of its weaponry (some estimates put that at now around 90%), and because of the United Nations Security Council resolutions 1929 passed in 2010 and UN 2231 passed as part of the JCPOA in 2015.¹¹ A decade ago, Chinese military sales to Iran were minimal, although the sale of technological components with dual-use continued, and Russia had delivered little more than the six Su-25 aircraft it sent Iran in the early 2000s. Before 2016 was out, however, Chinese and Iranian defense ministers had agreed to hold joint military exercises, and Moscow had delivered an S-300 defense system to Iran (that Israel is reported to have destroyed in October 2024).¹² Over the next few years with the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and the expiration of some UN restrictions in 2020, the Chinese and Russian cooperation with Iran accelerated. In 2021, Chinese and Iranian foreign ministers signed a 25-year agreement that forecast strategic cooperation, collaborative training and research, along with military joint ventures (e.g. the coproduction of fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow reportedly in 2023 agreed to provide Su-35 fighter jets and Mi-28 attack helicopters, perhaps the S-400 missile defense system, and launched an Iranian satellite into space. In March 2024, Russian warships arrived in Iran to take part in "Maritime Security Belt" drills with Iranian and Chinese naval forces in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

Leaders in Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran make no secret of their common aversion to Washington's global

leadership position. This does not mean, however, that they are targeting the flow of oil as was the fear in the 20th Century Cold War. China needs the flow of oil and benefits from stable prices, while Russia does not have the military wherewithal to expend in the region. Its recent cooperation with Iran revolved around promises Moscow made for the future in exchange for immediate help it needed from Iran in the form of missiles and drones flowing to Russia's war in Ukraine. Both Beijing and Moscow use the anti-colonial and anti-U.S. sentiments resident in the region to advance their general geostrategic line, but they do not create these. Moreover, they are pursuing relations with both Iran and the pro-west Arab states, including the U.A.E., Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The rapprochement across the Gulf they propose has potentially threatening implications for Israel. But here too, the risks seem manageable. China maintains robust economic relations with Israel, and Russia retains working relations with Israel to manage the potential for direct clashes in Syria. Neither makes confrontation with Israel a core part of their strategic relationships with the regional states.

After the war in 1973, Anwar Sadat concluded that Egypt, Syria, and Iraq would not be able to defeat Israel by force partly because of the asymmetry between what the United States was both able and willing to do for Israel and what the Soviet Union was able and willing to do for its Arab allies.¹³ At the geostrategic level that asymmetry persists today. Neither China nor Russia is prepared to back an Iranian bid for Middle East primacy. Instead, they counsel caution and prudent restraint on Tehran when it is attacked by Israel. They may say things to deter a direct U.S. strike on Iran, but American leaders seem less concerned about these countervailing great power risks than the George H.W. Bush administration was about igniting Soviet pushback as Iraqi forces were driven out of Kuwait at the close of the 20th Century's Cold War.

Part 3: Regional trends

The contest between the great powers today has not yet crystalized in ways that erase the complexity of the

regional disputes. For example, they do not see local issues only through the global balance of power, or characterize the regional actors as simply good guys and bad guys depending on their willingness to cooperate with them or their great power rival. China and Russia are cultivating relations on both sides of the Gulf, as Washington did in the early days of the last Cold War when its top priority was access to oil. The United States seeks to contain Iran not because leaders see Iran as a Russian or Chinese satellite but rather because they see Iran as a threat to U.S. interests on its own. Where China, and perhaps Russia, can imagine decoupling the conflicts across the Gulf from those in the Levant, with an eye on the flow of oil, the American strategy ties the two together linking its interest in Israel to those in the Gulf in ways thought not to be possible previously.

One of the most consequential trends in the region over the past forty year has been the shift in geopolitical weight from the states of the Levant to the states of the Gulf. The Arab Cold War that Malcolm Kerr described fifty years ago between the republics and the monarchies evolved in 1970s toward an Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi front of resistance to Israel and the West that also represented a populist threat to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Sheikdoms.¹⁴ After Egypt left that front in the middle 1970s, Syria and Iraq briefly unified but this was short-lived. Iraq's attack and subsequent eight years of war with Iran, followed by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the U.S. response to that, and subsequent invasion and occupation destroyed most of Iraq's geopolitical weight. The Arab Spring took its greatest toll on Syria. The secular military regime of Bashar Al-Assad suffered enormous losses over a decade of war, partly because of Gulf and Turkish support for opposition forces. Ironically, the competition between Sunni opposition leaders and their external patrons may be credited with helping the Assad regime to survive for so long, although Iranian and Russian intervention appeared to play the decisive role in assuring that.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the civil war destroyed Syria's geopolitical capacity, leaving it unable to exercise control over its own territory. This left Iran as the last anchor of a much weaker resistance front.

In 2023, the capacities of Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. to influence regional and global affairs outstripped those of any state in the Levant. The CIA estimates of Real GDP (purchasing power) and GDP/Capita in Saudi Arabia (\$1.831 trillion, \$49,600) and in the U.A.E. (\$720 billion, \$75,600) dwarf those in Iraq (\$573 billion, \$12,600), Syria (\$62 billion, \$2,900), and Lebanon (\$66 billion, \$12,300). Iran is on par in terms of GDP (\$1.44 trillion) but not GDP per capita (\$16,200). Military net assessments are notoriously complicated and inherently subjective, but nonetheless the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that Saudi Arabia's defense expenditures account for 36.7% of all those in the Middle East and North Africa with the U.A.E. and Qatar accounting for an additional 11% and 4.8% of the total.¹⁶ By way of comparison, Iran accounts for 3.9%, Iraq 5.5%, and Israel 11.9%. IISS estimates that Iran has more active military personnel (610,000) than Saudi Arabia (257,000) and the U.A.E. (63,000) combined with these GCC states now supporting more military personnel than Iraq (193,800) or Syria (169,500).¹⁷ Of course, modern technologies (e.g. missiles and drones) and hybrid warfare provide avenues along which Iran and Arab resistance front allies can inflict serious harm on Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other U.S. interests. The threats emanating from interstate war, however, have evolved. They still flow from Iran and could be existential if Tehran acquired nuclear weapons, but IISS concludes that Iran's most important leverage comes from its allegiances with mostly non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, and the (then standing) Assad government in Syria.

In some American eyes, the existence of Hezbollah, Shi'a militia in Iraq, the Houthis, and Assad are attributed to Iranian imperialism.¹⁸ In simplified images reminiscent of 20th Century Cold War stereotypes, they are seen as tenacles and pawns not of Russia or China this time but of Iran. Tehran certainly provides them with money, arms, intelligence, and incorporates them into its strategic planning. They are not simply creations of Iran, however. Amal and Hezbollah organized to protect the Lebanese Shi'a from a Christian dominated army and Israeli bombings and incursions.¹⁹ Iraqi Shi'a know full well who

supported and protected them in the times of Saddam Hussein, and Iran's critical role in defeating the ISIS Sunni led minstate. While some Shi'a Iraqi nationalists resent Iranian interference in Iraqi politics, they nevertheless protect their alliance with Iran. The Houthis have their own domestic story as well. In Syria, the secular Muslims and Christian that stayed with the minority led Assad regime through the brutal civil war turned to Iran to counterbalance a Sunni dominated Arab world that supported Islamist groups in Syria, which are now poised to be ascendant in post-Assad Syria. Likewise, it makes sense to see Hamas turning to Iran for its own reasons as much as it makes sense to attribute that to Iranian imperialism. Clearly, there is no space here to delve into the domestic histories across the Middle East, but it is possible to warn against over-simplifying by ignoring them completely. Doing that leads to overconfident projections that these movements would go away without Iran and that they fight Israel and the United States only because of it.

A second important trend in the region is the continuing centrality of what Michael Hudson more than forty years ago described as the Arab states' search for legitimacy.²⁰ The Arab states in the Levant and the Gulf did not enjoy widespread feelings among their citizens of national belonging to a community coterminous with the state boundaries. The states were instead crosscut by identity communities that transcended state boundaries, some religious (Sunni and Shi'a) and some ethnic (Arab and Kurdish) that complicated nation-state building endeavors.²¹ Those identities make domestic power sharing contentious and create avenues for rival political entrepreneurs mobilizing people on transnational identity appeals. The result has been authoritarian governments with narrow bases of popular appeal suppressing domestic opposition with brute force and instead of addressing their grievances and aspirations for better treatment aggressively discrediting them as foreign inspired.

Iran is no different. The clerical regime also attributes its domestic opposition to foreign subversion and relies on coercion more than legitimacy (i.e. voluntary compliance with the state flowing from a feeling of obligation more

than fear). What weight to give these alleged perceptions of external threat compared to desires to hang onto domestic privileges, wealth, and status when attributing motives to the government in Iran appears to vary with the sentiments observers feel toward regime change. A similar motivated reasoning when it comes to weighing the perceived threats and motives driving leaders in Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. may prevail as well. It is difficult to gauge the legitimacy governments enjoy in states that Freedom House concludes are not free and Polity labels as autocracies. Freedom House scores political freedoms in Saudi Arabia (1) even lower than those in Iran (4) with both also scoring low (7) on civil liberties.²² On Polity's negative 10 to positive 10 scale, Saudi Arabia scores minus 10, U.A.E. minus eight, and Iran minus seven. Although these Western based rating systems may be biased, they nevertheless reinforce an important point: Leaders in these states still do not trust their own citizens to support their rule.

With the shift of geopolitical weight to the Gulf and the persistence of domestic insecurities, the threat Iran posed both militarily and as a subversive instigator remained significant for Saudi and other GCC leaders. It also remained a focal point of Israeli concerns, particularly its role in Lebanon (via Hezbollah) and Syria. It was not a threat, however, that instilled the kind of caution and wariness in Washington and Jerusalem that might pertain if the balance of power was even. Although the ambitions of the early 2000s of unipolar American domination had been chastened by the realities of the Iraq War, the sense of primacy persists, perhaps reflected in the title of Donald Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's book *Never Give An Inch*.²³ The Iran threat is seen as one that can be more than just contained. It can be defeated. Maximum pressure to weaken Iran economically, coupled with support for opposition groups outside the country such as People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), also known as Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) would hopefully hasten regime change. The risk Iran would go nuclear, that the Obama administration had tried to reduce through arms control, President Trump sought to deter by threats of direct military strikes. Likewise, his administration in coordination with Prime Minister Netanyahu's government

made clear that continued Iranian collaboration with anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. movements in the Arab world would be met with direct attack on military installations, supply lines, and regional militia leadership – as demonstrated by the decision to kill General Qasem Soleimani.

The aim of containing and eventually eliminating the last anchor of the resistance front may motivate some of the American efforts to enlist Saudi Arabia into an I2 - U2 axis, but it is not sufficient to assure the alliance materializes. There are reservations in both Riyadh and Washington. Saudi exhaustion after limited successes in Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria appears to have pushed it towards a focus on economic transformation and development for the future more than endless regional confrontations. Moreover, Saudi Arabia caught some of the Iranian retaliations for the American strategy of maximum pressure and did not enjoy the sort of protection from this they may have anticipated the U.S. would provide. The combination of changing economic priorities and the uncertainty that the American plan to bring about change in Iran would yield positive results at acceptable costs may have led leaders in Riyadh to give the Chinese engineered détente a chance. The leadership in Riyadh appears to perceive a margin of security from which they can bargain with the United States demanding substantial payoffs for their allegiance. They can also pursue the Chinese strategy at the same time and take advantage of the great power competition brewing in the early days of what might be a 21st Century Cold War as Nasser's Egypt tried to do in the mid-20th Century.

Looking across the years since the Arab Spring, Saudi leaders may have seen a trend featuring a failure to contain Hezbollah in Lebanon even after putting heavy pressure on the Lebanese prime minister to do more, a failure to overthrow Bashar Assad in Syria, a failure to disrupt the continued primacy in Iraq of Shi'a leaders with close ties to Iran, and a failure after years of war in Yemen to defeat the Houthis or even challenge their control over Sanaa and most of the old North Yemen. It is not hard to imagine that leaders in Riyadh grew skeptical that the conflicts inside these states would be resolved by more

Saudi competitive interference, and, consequently, may have become open to plans for de-escalation and turning attention to economic and development priorities in the Kingdom. The Chinese mediated restoration of relations with Iran in March 2023 and Riyadh's acceptance of Syria's return to the Arab League a few months later may reflect this sort of pessimistic reading of the trends over the past decade or so – and of the priority of the goals of Vision 2030. Whether Israel's recent attacks that have weakened Hezbollah, coupled with Assad's fall and Israel's degradation of Syria residual military capabilities, plus Israel's direct strikes on Iran demonstrating its vulnerability and weakness will rekindle in Riyadh optimism for intra-Arab and cross Gulf confrontation remains to be seen.

While many leaders in Washington agree Iran is a threat, there remains substantial disagreement over the role Saudi Arabia plays in meeting that threat. In a recent interview, for example, Dennis Ross, a long-time participant in US policy discussions, argued that if Saudi normalization with Israel was not on the table, there should be no discussion of a U.S.-Saudi alliance or any of the rest of the inducements commonly discussed.²⁴ It is not Iran's threat to oil or the GCC states alone, or even primarily, that drives Washington's policy. Iran's threat to Israel plays the key role as does the opportunity to use Tehran's threat to Saudi Arabia to induce Riyadh's normalization with Israel. There appears to be a confidence in both Washington and Jerusalem that they can deal with it, if necessary, without Saudi Arabia. Ross, for instance, describes the network of Arab allies tied to Iran as dangerous, but, at the same time, as the "axis of misery."

The shift of geostrategic power from the Levant to the Gulf coupled with American primacy coincided with a notable reduction in the priority granted in the West to recognizing a Palestinian state or even pressing diplomatically for a process promising that. The Abraham Accords were, of course, advertised in the U.A.E. as a step in that direction and not simply an abandonment of the Palestinian cause, much as Anwar Sadat had described the Camp David Accords in the same way. In Jerusalem and

Washington, however, the talk was of making peace first between Israel and the Arab states, thereby weakening the Palestinians' leverage as they sought recognition. There had not been serious movement toward a peace process and negotiated Israeli-Palestinian outcome since September 11, 2001, and across the first quarter of the 21st Century a one-state reality with unilaterally defined boundaries enforced by fences, walls, and barriers of different sorts emerged. Although China and Russia recognize a Palestinian state, as do 145 of the 193 members of the United Nations, the prospects that the governments in Israel or Washington would do this appeared to decline across these decades. The political right wing in Israel moved to openly promote annexation and expulsion as the traditional pro-peace left, (e.g. the Meretz party) nearly disappeared and most of the population turned against a two-state outcome.

The Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war in Gaza put discussion of a two-state outcome back into circulation in the United States, but much less so in Israel. To the contrary, the effect of Hamas' attack was to make more Israelis even more opposed to that prospect. Moreover, the talk of a process perhaps leading to a two-state solution evident in American media op-eds was not much evident in the actions of the Biden administration, where talk of even supporting a ceasefire after tens of thousands were dead, never mind a peace process, remained contentious. When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a joint session of Congress on July 24, 2024, his main theme was "total victory." The agenda was not a two-state outcome but finishing the job, which just as likely in his argument applied not only to Gaza but also to defeating the sole remaining anchor (that is Iran) of what had been a formidable resistance front forty years earlier. His focus shifted so heavily to Iran that it appeared as if he was arguing that if not for Iran, the Palestinian resistance would disappear. While some of this may simply be propaganda shifting attention away from what Israel is doing in Gaza to an Iranian threat that still moves Americans, it also likely reveals a reading of the geopolitical trends that suggest little compromise is necessary because an overwhelming power advantage

still exists, and the use of force can compel eventual capitulation by Iran and its allies in the Arab world. In this perspective, the operation in Gaza and the action against Iran undermine the Palestinian ability to resist, and perhaps the will to persist in claiming statehood at such high costs, leaving Israel in control of all the territory it currently controls and leaving it up to Palestinians to either accept and live in that unfortunate status or leave.

Part 4: Routes ahead

A few weeks after Saudi Arabia re-established relations with Iran, U.S. National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan spoke with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to reaffirm that while the United States supported peace and development, it remained committed to deterring Iranian aggression.²⁵ Although there have been efforts in the 21st Century to engineer de-escalation in U.S. - Iranian relations, these have been short-lived and have revealed the powerful domestic coalitions in both Tehran and Washington that are opposed to it. The Obama administration proposed a new beginning in this direction only to see the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009 crushed by force as clerical conservatives warned against the dangers of “velvet subversion.” In the U.S., Obama did not have the domestic support to sustain even arms control with Iran, never mind any sort of rapprochement. After broader efforts at de-escalation failed, Obama turned to arms control as a stopgap measure which could not be instantiated through legislative action in either chamber. In May 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA, arguing it was foolish to let money flow to the government in Tehran, and even before that the U.S. Congress had passed new sanctions bills partly offsetting any financial relief the Iranian regime enjoyed from the JCPOA. President Biden early on in his term talked of returning to the JCPOA but faced strong opposition to this, uniformly in the Republican Party and even among Democratic leaders.

Back in Iran, the clerical conservatives faced another robust popular challenge to their leadership after the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. They met this with

forceful coercion and mass arrests until late March 2023 when the protests dwindled. After President Ebrahim Raisi died suddenly in May 2024, Masoud Pezeshkian was sworn in as president in July 2024 talking of the need for economic development in Iran and expressing a desire to find a way to reduce the sanctions imposed on Iran. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has not publicly forbidden Pezeshkian from exploring this, but he has expressed skepticism that this will succeed. It does seem unlikely that the new Iranian president could offer anything close to enough to persuade incoming President Trump to move very far away from maximum pressure. Constraints on the Iranian nuclear program alone did not appear to be enough to persuade the Biden administration. Iran's support for regional allies like Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis that had been set aside in the JCPOA were prominent in Congressional and Senatorial debates and are likely to remain so. Moreover, concessionary moves by Tehran might be as likely to persuade Israeli and American leaders that pressure is working as they are to persuade them it is no longer needed, perhaps even leading them to wonder if Iranian recognition of Israel could be within reach, something easier to imagine after regime change in Iran than before it.

There may have been missed opportunities to unwind the now escalating and long-standing conflict between Iran and the United States. Historians can argue about that in the future. At this point, however, there is not enough domestic support on either side to sustain the process such an effort would inevitably entail. With hawks in Jerusalem and Washington seeing a substantial power advantage in Israel's and the United States' favor, and Iranian setbacks in Lebanon and Syria showing its weakness, the debates are likely to revolve around whether to move beyond containment to the active rollback of the Iranian regime. There are risks that the pressure will hurt Iranian citizens more so than Iranian officials, but this has typically been seen as the price of economic instruments of coercion and manageable to an acceptable degree with the targeting of sanctions. There is also the risk the clerical regime, its Revolutionary Guard Corps, and vigilante networks across the society (e.g. the Basiji) will double-down on coercion

at home. This too, however, is typically seen as a price Iranians pay more so than a cost Israelis or Americans bear. The risks that attract more attention in the West are the risks of escalation both in the region and geopolitically as Iran aligns with China and Russia, and possibly acquires nuclear weapons.

One way to manage the threats inherent in escalatory cycles is to pursue a *détente* between the protagonists. This is the approach the Chinese spearheaded between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. and between Saudi Arabia and Assad's Syria. This may still defuse some of the escalatory momentum in Iraq and Yemen. The defeat of Assad and the rise of Sunni based Hayat Tahrir al-Sham that enjoys the support of Turkey and Qatar could make leaders in Riyadh nervous as the Muslim Brotherhood did in Egypt in 2011. Syria, however, is likely to be so weak and in such desperate need of aid that Saudi Arabia will see opportunities to shape its future through positive engagement as much as through confrontation. In any case, Syria and the other Arab states in the Levant need for the foreseeable future to attend to economic development first and foremost.²⁶ They are geopolitically weak and relatively poor compared to the Gulf states with according to the 2023 Arab Youth Survey 53% of young people in the Levant wanting to emigrate.²⁷ A *détente* in the Gulf, however, does not necessarily have a de-escalatory effect on Iranian – Israeli relations. Rather, it works against Israel's approach to managing the risk of escalation which rests on preserving and demonstrating escalation dominance, which is strengthened by adding Saudi Arabia to the I2 – U2 axis. Moreover, while the religious sectarian cleavages within these Arab states might be softened marginally by the cross-Gulf *détente*, anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian sentiments in these states may not be, and it is the dilemma Israel faces that animates U.S. policy concerns far more than the internal contests in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen -- except to the extent these impinge upon the Israeli – Palestinian conflict.

Managing the risks of escalation through the preservation and demonstration of escalation dominance may still be possible for Israel and the United States for the time being

but faces the persisting concern that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons to reduce its asymmetrical disadvantage. A recent report of the IAEA is concerning in this regard both because of the amount of enriched uranium Iran now possesses and the declining ability of the IAEA to monitor activities as Iran limits access to and the transparency of its program.²⁸ No one in the West can know for certain what Iranians plan in this regard, and their plans can evolve as circumstances change, but several U.S. presidents and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu have pledged to not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. The military paths to making good on that pledge, should Iran decide to move ahead have been charted for some time but remain costly and uncertain. An initial devastating attack from the air may destroy key parts of Iran's arsenal but the risk that dangerous elements of it remain could easily provoke more intrusive intervention, and as seen in the Iraq War, once on that sliding board the path forward can be arduous and long. Of course, no one in the Trump camp proposes a repeat of the Iraq War, but, at the same time, they do not explain how Iran's nuclear move, should it take it, will be defeated by aerial assaults alone and avoid that, this time in a country much larger and more powerful than Iraq, and one that might have great power friends in China and Russia something Saddam Hussein did not have.

At this point, neither China nor Russia is likely to defend Iran against an American attack should Iran move to go nuclear. They also are not likely to back Iran, or its allies, should they attack Israel. In the face of Israeli demonstrations of dominance, for example, regular bombings in Lebanon and Syria, sabotage and assassinations in Tehran, and direct Israeli bombings of locations in Iran, leaders in China and Russia have counselled Iran to exercise restraint and caution. They appear to know, as do leaders in Jerusalem and Washington, that Iran is not able to back-up its tough talk with effective military action without suffering withering retaliation. This is not to say, however, that China or Russia would allow the United States and Israel to pursue regime change by force in Iran, as was the case in Iraq and Libya. In a scenario like that, Beijing and Moscow, and other friends in the SCO would likely move as NATO did

in Ukraine to make the foreign intervention expensive and drawn out. Although Russia has little it could spare for Iran, a war in the Gulf might serve its interests both by pulling U.S. attention and resources away from Ukraine and by heightening divisions between Washington and key NATO states (e.g. France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom) over how to deal with Iran and the Palestinian question.

In response to the war in Gaza, Yemen's Houthi movement has targeted international shipping, and Hezbollah opened a second front. Those moves were popular. The 2023 Arab Youth Survey finds that there is widespread indigenous support for the Palestinian cause and overwhelming opposition to normalizing relations with Israel. In Jordan, that survey finds only 6% in favor of normalization and 94% opposed. In Kuwait, it finds 14% in favor and 86% opposed, in Saudi Arabia close to 98% opposed and in Iraq virtually everyone leaning that way.²⁹ Surely, reducing the Iranian supply of weapons would make it easier for Israel to carry on in Gaza as it pleases but this is not likely to defuse the Arab anger and sentiments that threaten Israel in the long run. Unfortunately, there may be no way for Israel to do that in the short or even medium term, although there may be a hopeful sign in the Arab Youth survey's results in Egypt and the U.A.E. In these two states, 73% and 75% respectively are found to favor normalization with Israel. Perhaps popular opinion follows the lead of the government and will accommodate to normalization if the state officials lead the way.

In the long term, Israel will want peace not only with the Arab states in the Gulf and North Africa, but also with those in the Levant. As mentioned at the outset, one route to travel to try to get to this follows the course of the I2 – U2 strategy with Israeli hawks arguing for total victory in Gaza and counting on Arabs in the GCC to over time get comfortable with normalization without a Palestinian state, and probably even with Israel as one state, annexing all the territory it currently controls. Expecting the power advantage Israel and the United States enjoy will persist for some time, advocates of this route are ready to risk escalation figuring calling Iran's, Russia's, and China's

bluff will reveal to those in the Levant and those in Iran that accommodation to this outcome is necessary. Many other Americans and some Israelis believe that appeasing Palestinian sentiment to some degree is needed to secure Saudi Arabia's ascension into the axis. This could involve returning to talk of a process leading to recognition of the Palestinian state or even genuine progress in that direction, although given the political realities in Israel and the United States it is hard to see how more than talk about process will materialize.

Pressing for peace in Gaza and the humane treatment of Palestinians does not need to be motivated by a desire to pull Saudi Arabia into an axis against Iran and a geostrategic alliance against China and Russia. There are many good moral and strategic reasons beside these for pressing Israel to do more to respect international standards and norms when dealing with the Palestinians. Seeking to persuade Saudi Arabia to make peace with Israel while helping it to prepare for war with Iran, while understandable in tactical terms, runs against the strategic objective of having all the states in the region grant priority to inward focused domestic developmental needs not more ruinous interstate conflict. Etel Solingen makes a strong case that leadership coalitions benefiting from national security-oriented states and exaggerated foreign threats is a key feature of the Middle East.³⁰ She argues this distinguishes it from East Asia where leadership coalitions granting priority to economic growth have prevailed and points to this as explanation of why the Middle East has suffered so much more conflict and enjoyed so much less human well-being.³¹ Saudi Arabia through its 2030 vision appears to aspire to a global role on par with South Korea and G-20 states. To get there, it needs to assure its defense but must also give priority to economic development. The United States by denying Riyadh offensive weapons to be used in Yemen has already nudged Saudi Arabia toward this sort of reorientation and should continue to do that, not stoke imaginary visions of primacy.

Although there is too little domestic support in Iran or the United States for any serious détente between them, there is room for Saudi Arabia and Iran to explore de-escalation

rather than escalating confrontation. The probability of heading off nuclear proliferation in the region seems higher along this course than the route running through I2 - U2 plus Saudi Arabia. Strengthening the anti-Iranian axis seems more likely to increase Iran's interest in nuclear weapons than decrease it, and the mounting Cold War dynamic provides it with possible support for this in Moscow and Beijing. Saudi Arabia has already made clear that if Iran goes that way, it too will follow suit and it has even more options than Iran to acquire the necessary ingredients. It can buy these from the United States and if it refuses turn to Moscow, Beijing, and Islamabad. Once Iran and Saudi Arabia escalate in this way, Turkey is likely to be close behind. At this point, Iran is already a latent nuclear power and ratcheting up the forces it faces, rather than encouraging détente seems more likely to push it toward deploying a preliminary weapon system. As already mentioned, this could touch off a pre-emptive Israeli strike and lead to rounds of further conflicts that would best be avoided if possible. The idea that the United States and Saudi Arabia with a I2 - U2 axis would be able to dictate terms to Iran and prevent it from moving to counterbalance with deployments and closer cooperation with China and Russia appears to more wishful thinking than prudent expectations.

The burgeoning great power contest goes well beyond the Middle East; it has already led to war in Ukraine and there is talk of conflict over Taiwan. In the Middle East, the conflicts are serious but not yet revolving primarily around great power conflicts of interest. China, Russia, and the United States all have interest in seeing oil continue to flow. American led sanctions imposed on Iran and Russia aim to take more oil off the market than any military attacks on shipping led by Iran or its Houthi allies, never mind by Russia or China. All three great powers are competing for the favor of Saudi Arabia, and Riyadh is likely to make use of that for the time being as it works both with China and Russia to mitigate the Iranian threat through détente and works with the United States to deter Tehran.³² Israel and Iran are at loggerheads, but it is the United States that is pressing for regime change in Iran not China or Russia threatening Israel. Both China and Russia recognize

Israel's right to exist and maintain relations with it. The challenge Israel faces in deciding how to deal with the Palestinians is not rooted in Tehran or hostile great powers but in demographics on the ground. The choices Israel makes regarding these are likely to defuse or exacerbate the threat it faces from Arab allies of the Palestinians more than how Riyadh and Tehran decide to act toward one another. A 21st Century Cold War is already shaping the global system and is likely to reinforce and bolster the military arsenals and fraught relations between regional protagonists. Before we resign ourselves to that costly and dangerous escalatory spiral it makes sense, however, to press for peace in the Levant and détente in the Gulf. For now, the United States has a margin of safety from which to take the risks inherent in this course, as does Israel. It makes sense to try that before that margin narrows further.

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Between pragmatism and ideology: Rethinking China-MENA relations in the time of crises

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In July 2024, China brokered national unity talks between representatives of fourteen Palestinian factions including Fatah and Hamas. The talks led to a reconciliation agreement which Beijing touted as a triumphant step towards resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only a little over a week later, news of the Israeli assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas, in Iran undermined Beijing's mediation efforts as hostage release negotiations were halted. Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi called Israel's attacks on Gaza "a disgrace for civilization," and called out the hypocrisy of Washington DC's silence on human rights abuses in Palestine compared to its vocal criticism on human rights issues in China. With a nod to the Uighur and Chinese Muslims in Xinjiang, Wang Yi stated, "if the United States cares so much about the human rights of Muslims, why does it continue to provoke or support wars in the Middle East and other regions, causing large numbers of innocent Muslim casualties?" He further asked why the US turns "a blind eye to the historical injustices the Arab people have faced and not support Palestine becoming a full member of the United Nations?"

China's involvement in brokering intra-Palestinian political faction talks, as well its vocal stance at the United Nations blaming the continuous loss of civilian life in Gaza on US's abstentions in votes on ceasefire resolutions, sits in contrast with Beijing's distance from and small scale engagement with the conflict when it came to condemning Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.¹ This ambivalent signaling from Beijing where at times it repeatedly invokes South-South solidarity and advocates for the need for an urgent ceasefire while at the same time it takes private and under the radar measures on other aspects of the conflict raises questions. Does China's increasing involvement in conflict mediation reflect a growing appetite to project or embrace

a more vocal or assertive leadership role in dispute resolution? Is Beijing's vocal criticism of the US in the latest Israel-Palestine conflict an indication that the PRC is ready to displace the US as a hegemon, or is it a limited counter-legitimizing tactic to reduce the influence of the US without seeking to replace it?

I argue that China's invoking of South-South solidarity in the context of the conflict in Gaza is not a signal of a newfound interest in leadership in security issues in the Middle East or an increased appetite to be involved in the Israel/Palestine conflict. Rather, this is an opportune moment for Beijing to take advantage of the costly alignment of the US to Israel and further deepen US's isolation in the region. As put by International Relations Professor Yan Xuetong, "the Israel-Gaza war will reduce the global political influence of the United States. This is already very obvious, because even its allies have to distance themselves from it on this issue. . . As the US' strategic relations with other major powers will be undermined, the strategic balance between China and the US will become less favourable to the US."²

To support my argument, I will revisit China's attitudes towards conflict resolution and mediation beyond the case of the war in Gaza. My analysis shows that despite rhetorical gestures to the contrary, China's appetite for entering conflicts in the Middle East (or in Africa for that matter) is very small. Where there are interests in buttressing China's image globally as a serious partner or undermining the position of the US in the region, then we will see measured and symbolic engagement. I also examine the Global Security Initiative as it has attracted some attention as a possible new framework that will guide a potentially more consequential involvement of China in global peace and security issues.

China and Conflict Resolution

The strategic context of China's approach to conflict resolution might at first glance appear uncertain. On the one hand, recent statements coming from Beijing articulate a vision of security engagement unique to China; on the other hand, it is not clear from those statements what the practical implications of such a strategy are now or will be in the future. At the Annual Conference of the Boao Forum for Asia in April of 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced Beijing's Global Security Initiative, promising to "build great synergy through win-win cooperation" with reliance on values like the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the Bandung Spirit.³ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi then gave a speech detailing the Global Security Initiative approach, describing it as "inspired by the diplomatic tradition and wisdom with unique Chinese characteristics" to continue and build on China's contributions to a peaceful international environment.⁴ The launch of the Global Security Initiative is just one of a number of ways that China has been increasingly inserting itself into global security and emphasizing the uniqueness of its values in that sphere. One of the goals of this paper is to disaggregate what "unique Chinese characteristics" mean in practice, especially for China-MENA relations.

I suggest that understanding these Chinese characteristics, is necessary, but not sufficient, to understand China's approaches to conflict resolution in the MENA region. The Global Security Initiative in its current form is a set of aspirations and principles rather than an explicit policy or doctrine about conflict resolution. This means that Beijing has flexibility in choosing which conflicts it engages and the level of effort it puts into those engagements. This paper is interested in understanding both the approach China uses to MENA relations and the variation in China's choices to engage in conflict mediation and resolution in some MENA contexts while refraining from doing so in others. To set the stage, I start by discussing China's overall commitments to a noninterference policy alongside a number of mechanisms and tools for conflict resolution that China has developed to gradually veer off the noninterference policy without harming its economic and

strategic interests in the Global South (MENA included). The paper's second section argues that there are three drivers behind China's choices to engage directly in conflict resolution globally which impact the MENA region specifically.

Principled noninterference and creative engagement

China has long endorsed a foreign policy approach that simultaneously centers its position as a leader of the Global South while at the same time committing to noninterference in the internal affairs and interests of other governments around the world. China consistently characterizes itself as a neutral actor in conflicts around the world – not involved or looking to be involved in the stakes of any conflict either within any state or among other states.⁵ This position is most explicitly outlined in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, announced after a 1954 meeting between Chinese and Indian officials by then-Premier Zhou Enlai, and referenced frequently in contemporary Chinese foreign policy. At the center of these Five Principles are commitments to mutual noninterference and respect for sovereignty.

In the intervening seven decades, China's non-interference commitments have changed significantly, where pragmatism has in many situations replaced a principled or ideological objection to any interference.⁶ This evolving approach, often identified as noninterference "with Chinese characteristics,"⁷ has allowed Beijing to significantly increase its global presence while referencing the original principles in its declared foreign policy with regularity. It has also allowed for strategic ambiguity in when and how China chooses to intervene in disputes across the globe, and led scholars to struggle with how to understand when and how China engages in conflict resolution.

Some scholars introduce types of engagement (like intervention, influence, and interference) and suggest that China makes different choices about engagement based on the kind and level of response that might be necessary in a particular situation.⁸ Other scholars suggest

that understanding Chinese involvement requires a different theoretical approach to engagement altogether. Along these lines, Huang and Shih argue that China's involvement in conflict resolution can be understood within a framework of "harmonious intervention," where China remains committed to its core values of mutual respect and constructive relations while at the same time being able to invest in defending its key interests abroad.⁹ Similarly, Chinese scholar Wang Yizhou described Chinese engagement abroad as "creative involvement," combining creative methods and a case-by-case decision-making framework rather than a single approach to whether to intervene or not.¹⁰ Chief among these creative methods is what Jesse Marks describes as a "conflict manager"¹¹ approach – using a first-mover advantage to creatively approach parties early in conflicts, offering resources in alignment with China's strategic interests and relative strengths. By engaging first and on its own terms, Beijing is able to avoid pressure to join intervention operations that other actors have designed and initiated.

The resources that China offers as a "conflict manager" are quite specific to China's foreign policy goals and interests. Marks describes China as using three key approaches: mediation, promoting talks among conflicting parties, and persuading parties to seek peace. It is important to note that the use of force or even power-political threats is absent from Chinese conflict resolution tools.¹² In fact, instead of deliberating for or even with parties that Beijing has brought to the table, Chinese practice has been described as quasi-mediation – Beijing facilitates conversations but does not play a significant role in the material negotiations while other mediating parties often look to persuade parties or even set the terms of peace negotiations.¹³

Even this quasi-mediation, however, happens less in the Middle East than in many places in the world. Burton observes that "it does not appear that China is carrying out quasi-mediation in any of the three Middle East conflicts [Libya, Syria, and Yemen]."¹⁴ Instead, Burton describes China's policy towards MENA conflicts as a "wait and see" approach.¹⁵ Sun and Zoubir disagree, however, arguing that

this overlooks Beijing's creative and subtle engagements in conflict mediation in the region. They argue that Western understandings of conflict mediation are too narrow to account for either what China does in the MENA region or how Chinese MENA policy works in practice. In the next section, I suggest a framework for beginning to understand both, discussing when China engages and how.

When China Engages and How

As Sun and Zoubir observe, "China reacts selectively and cautiously to different events according to what its policymakers consider to be of either vital or secondary interest."¹⁶ In this section, I argue that three factors are important in how Beijing makes choices to engage in direct conflict resolution. First, China is more likely to get involved in resolving a dispute if that dispute is important to China's security or economic interests (high gains). Second, China is more likely to engage in conflict resolution if there is a low probability of getting entangled with other, particularly Western, powers (low risk). Third, Beijing getting involved in dispute resolution requires both the political capacity to influence stakeholders in the dispute and political willingness on the part of Chinese bureaucrats to do the necessary diplomatic work (political will). Absence of this political will might put Chinese diplomats in the unwanted position of losing face in the event one or more parties to the conflict reject Beijing's mediation.

This set of conditions has specific impacts on China's engagements in different places in the world. For example, if these conditions hold, countries in the Middle East would be places that China is less likely to engage in conflict resolution given that the risks of entanglement in complicated conflicts outweighs the benefits. Despite China's crude oil needs depending heavily on Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, there is a high risk of entanglement with other powers, given the number of local stakeholders and governments from around the world which see the area as key to their security interests. It is easy to imagine in that situation that Beijing would see the high risks of involvement outweighing any gain that

it might get from other than symbolic gestures towards conflict resolution. The case of the Houthis attacks in the Red Sea and Beijing's quiet negotiations with the Houthis to give safe passage to Chinese ships instead of applying pressure on the group to safeguard passage for all seafaring communication demonstrate Beijing's unwillingness to be involved in a larger scale role of public good provider.

A similar conclusion might be drawn about contemporary engagement in the Sahel for China, where it is a region without high urgency for Beijing and with high risks. The high risks include but are not limited to the strategic interests of France in the region, frequent engagement by states in the European Union, active involvement of AFRICOM (the US Africa Command), and Russian commitments in the region. Despite the retreat of France and EU influence in Mali, we did not see Beijing increase its military footprint in the Sahel. Quite the opposite, Beijing seems to be rather distancing itself from Russia's presence in the region for the chaotic impact that Wagner has had when PRC favors stability as it is more conducive to achieving economic gains in the region.

China has explicitly signaled reticence to engage these risks and has by and large focused its activities in Mali to cultural diplomacy, human capital investments, and infrastructure construction deals for the most part.¹⁷ Yet, between the Beijing-backed Iran-Saudi Arabia talks and the war in Gaza, it is clear that isolating the U.S. and gaining a reputation as a security partner in the region are benefits that outweighed the high risk of entanglement with the U.S. and others in the region. This feeds into what Stacie Goddard terms the PRC's counter-legitimation strategies.¹⁸ Indeed, one more important aspect that

shows the extent to which Beijing's mediation efforts and diplomatic capital are limited in their reach beyond symbolic gestures is Beijing's inability to get mediation parties (either in the case of Iran-Saudi or intra-Palestinian faction talks) to do anything tangible beyond talks. This points to the challenge for the PRC to effectively turn its power to facilitate mediation into a power to exert influence over the relevant parties to go beyond symbolic talks into more tangible action.¹⁹

In conclusion, this paper has showed that despite the heightened rhetoric and discourse from Beijing speaking up for Palestine and criticizing the US for its "unconditional support" of Israel despite its clear breaches of International Law, there is not enough evidence to back up the hypothesis that this is a turning moment for Beijing's leadership role as its involvement has mostly remained symbolic. Instead, it seems as though Beijing is taking advantage of Israel's attacks on Gaza and Lebanon to rally Arab and Muslim elites and isolate the US in the region. However, China's approach is not without limitations and liabilities. Indeed, a serious cost that might not have been part of the initial calculation of Beijing when speaking up during the Gaza ceasefire resolution votes is that empty commitments or symbolic gestures can only go so far in establishing China as a serious security partner for MENA states. When China stops at rhetorical support and symbolic solidarity rather than sanctioning or showing more practical leadership, this rapprochement eventually loses its luster. This can ultimately hurt its interests in the MENA region in the long term if China is not able to concretize its support in ways that can bring change to the security situation.

Endnotes

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Kabul, Ukraine, Gaza – evolving trajectories in U.S.-Gulf security trajectories (and perceptions)

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Little more than six months separated the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 from the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹ The manner by which the U.S. seemed to abandon the Afghan government in the face of a resurgent Taliban cast doubt among partner nations in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as to the reliability and 'staying power' of the U.S. in the region, and rekindled memories of the withdrawal of American support for Hosni Mubarak in Egypt as the Arab uprisings began in early 2011.² The fall of Kabul appeared to be another blow to a U.S.-led regional order that was already being questioned by officials in the Gulf States even as they contributed to its weakening by diversifying their own political, economic, and, to a lesser extent, security and defense relationships.

Whereas the withdrawal from Afghanistan witnessed the U.S. acting unilaterally to secure its own interests, narrowly defined and without seeming to take account of those of its partners and allies, the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine saw the Biden administration engage intensively with allies and partners and respond aggressively. U.S. intelligence and information-sharing, which were seen to have erred badly in Afghanistan, was a high-profile and very visible policy priority over Ukraine, and restored a measure of the credibility that was so shaken in 2021.³ However, perhaps surprisingly, the sight of the Biden administration re-engaging with partners and allies over Ukraine did not deliver a 'dividend' in terms of restoring Gulf trust in the U.S. as a security partner, and responses to the war in Gaza since October 2023 have created new gaps in U.S.-GCC positioning.

The 'nuts and bolts' of security and defense ties between the U.S. and Gulf States have continued to evolve, albeit in a more transactional form as part of a looser relationship that moves beyond even the pretense of adherence to a

regional order in a 'post-Gaza' Middle East. More than three decades after the structure of U.S. primacy in the Gulf took shape in the late-1980s and early-1990s, recent developments, including since October 7, 2023, illustrate the growing divergence of regional positions. For instance, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, receiving Iran's Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi in October 2024, just as the Biden administration was weighing its support for a retaliatory Israeli attack on Iran, demonstrated just how far regional interests had moved apart.

Two decades of tension

Deciding where to begin with the many issues which caused concern in Gulf capitals at U.S. policies is like asking how long a piece of string might be. The second term of the George W. Bush administration saw frictions develop between the U.S. and GCC states, notably Saudi Arabia, over the mishandling of the occupation of post-Saddam Iraq and the sense in Gulf capitals that Iran appeared to be the primary geopolitical beneficiary.⁴ During the Obama administration, a perception of drift began to develop, including in relation to the 'pivot to Asia' which Gulf leaders saw as a shift in U.S. focus away from the Middle East, rather than post-Cold War Europe, and in Obama's response to the Arab uprisings in 2011. Later issues that caused friction in (certain) GCC capitals included the U.S.-Iran talks in 2013 and the Trump administration's perceived abandonment of Qatar in 2017 and then of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2019. The fact that the U.S. did not respond to the (Iran-linked) attacks on Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Al Khurais, which temporarily knocked out half the Kingdom's production capacity in September 2019, caused shockwaves in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and led to an immediate reassessment of policy options.⁵

Decisions by multiple presidents thus injected doubt as to the value or even the existence of security guarantees which were believed by many observers of regional affairs to form the bedrock of contemporary U.S.-Gulf relations. For many in positions of leadership in the Gulf States, the fall of Kabul in 2021 appeared to be one more step in a process of U.S. disengagement which they perceived to be one-directional and to take place across three successive presidential administrations as different as Obama was to Trump and Trump was to Biden.⁶ A narrative that the U.S. is less interested in the Gulf, and less relevant, has proven stubbornly resilient to counter.

The strenuous attempts made by the Biden administration to work with allies and partners to coordinate policy in early 2022 as Russian forces massed on the border with Ukraine, and then to push back against Moscow after the full-scale invasion, ought to have repaired some of the damage caused by the optics around the chaos in Kabul. Specific measures included the deployment of additional U.S. troops to Eastern Europe as well as the sharing of intelligence designed to deter Vladimir Putin from moving into Ukraine.⁷ Qatar, which was accorded Major Non-NATO Ally Status by the Biden administration in January 2022, in part as recognition of its assistance to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, also sought to play a balancing role in gas markets as Emir Tamim visited Biden in the White House and hosted Russian energy officials in Doha.⁸ Europe's move away from Russia also restated the Gulf States' centrality in global energy security considerations.⁹

The 'coming together' effect noticeable in U.S.-European (and NATO) response to Russia-Ukraine did not, however, appear to mollify strained relationships in the Gulf; if anything, the responses to the invasion made trajectories which had taken shape in prior years all the more visible. Indeed, policy responses in Gulf capitals to the war in Ukraine largely reinforced the narrative that the U.S. and its partners were drifting apart, as the Gulf States largely opted not to pick sides and resisted efforts to draw them into questions of great power competition and strategic rivalry. The sight of the Biden administration re-engaging

with partners and allies over Ukraine did not bring a 'dividend' in terms of the restoration of Gulf trust in the U.S. as a security partner.

Like much of the Global South, the Gulf States did not take sides in the Russia-Ukraine war. Policymakers in GCC capitals did not share the view of their counterparts in Washington and Europe that the collective defense of Ukraine was 'an international order defining event, a generational moment in which international alliances and norms are being reshaped.'¹⁰ Regional leaders refused to get drawn into a new era of bloc rivalry and, unlike the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, did not deem Russia's aggression against Ukraine to pose a direct threat to their political or security interests. This was the case even in Kuwait, with its own memory of being invaded by a larger neighbour, although Kuwaiti leaders did call out the Russian aggression more vocally.¹¹

A variation in stances toward the February 2022 invasion and subsequent developments nevertheless fell along a spectrum that ranged from Qatar aligning most closely with Ukraine (and the U.S. position) and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE leaning more closely toward Russia, with Kuwait and Oman falling somewhat in-between. Coincidentally, these variations in position roughly mirrored those during the GCC rift between 2017 and 2020. However, while Qatari leaders announced a pause in new investments in Russia, existing links with Moscow remained unchanged, as the Qatar Investment Authority became the largest non-Russian shareholder in Rosneft and former Minister of State for Energy Mohammed bin Saleh Al-Sada was elected chairman of the Rosneft board in 2023.¹² The UAE response was complicated by the fact that the country had just taken up a rotating two-year seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2022-2023. This forced the UAE to take positions even if their choice was to abstain on two Security Council votes in February 2022 which condemned the invasion and called for an emergency session of the General Assembly, which caused considerable friction with U.S. officials.¹³

Issue-specific partnerships

U.S.-Gulf security relationships and defense partnerships have survived the shocks of the 2010s. Evidence since 2015 suggests that such ties work better on an ad hoc, case-by-case basis rather than as part of any grand framework. An example of the latter was the launch of a U.S.-GCC Strategic Partnership in 2015, at a summit at Camp David between Gulf leaders (only two of whom attended) and President Obama, and the creation of five working groups to cover cooperation in counterterrorism, missile defense, military preparedness and training, critical defense capabilities, and cyber security.¹⁴ However, the working groups fell into abeyance during the Trump administration, when they were superseded by efforts to develop a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) with GCC states plus Egypt and Jordan. MESA failed to gain traction for a variety of reasons, including the intra-GCC rift, a failure of parties to agree on the scope and scale of the issues to be covered by the initiative, and Egypt's abrupt withdrawal in 2019.¹⁵

The U.S.-GCC working groups reconvened in February 2023, nearly a year into the Russia-Ukraine war, for their first meeting in years, against the backdrop of the supply of Iranian armed drones to Russia and the provision of Russian defense assistance to Iran. The fact that Iranian weapons systems were being tested on the battlefield in Ukraine and in operational and combat settings against civilian and infrastructure targets highlighted how the war could impact U.S.-GCC interests.¹⁶ U.S. and Gulf States' navies participated in a major 18-day International Maritime Exercise in February and March 2023 co-led by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the U.S. and directed from the Maritime Security Centre in Oman. Held under the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, more than 7000 personnel and 35 ships from over 50 countries and organizations took part in exercises in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf.¹⁷ Russia and China joined Iran in a joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman the same month, illustrating how, in the 'nuts and bolts' of security and defense relationships, the GCC still chose to side with the U.S.¹⁸

New initiatives since 2020 suggest that security partnerships between the U.S. and individual Gulf States are continuing on bespoke bilateral and largely issue-specific bases. CENTCOM worked closely with Saudi officials to develop the Red Sands Integrated Experimentation Center as a regional testing facility in Saudi Arabia to boost cooperation against the shared threat from missile and drone attacks from Iran and regional proxies.¹⁹ Joint exercises involving U.S. and Saudi forces have tested systems to destroy and disable unmanned aerial systems of the type that breached Saudi air defences during the ballistic missile and drone strikes on oil facilities in September 2019.²⁰ U.S. officials also play an integral role in Saudi Arabia's defense transformation plan with Department of Defense personnel assisting their Saudi counterparts with overhauling human-capital development, joint staff development, intelligence reorganization and force sustainment, and the development of a National Defense College. The U.S. role in capacity-building in Saudi Arabia is a step up from the hitherto-largely scattered interventions tied to the foreign military sales process rather than in support of any deeper or underlying policy objective.²¹

Another sign of U.S. commitment to security ties was the signing in September 2023 of a Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA) with Bahrain. Announced during a visit to D.C. by Bahrain's Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, C-SIPA will expand defense and security cooperation as well as trade and investment ties through collaborative measures across the security spectrum, albeit without a mutual defense guarantee.²² C-SIPA may build upon the recent spate of U.S. strategic dialogues, which began with Qatar in 2017 and now encompass every GCC state on a bilateral (rather than collective) basis. How C-SIPA unfolds will likely be studied in other Gulf capitals, especially Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which have sought enhanced U.S. guarantees, most recently in relation to a normalization of ties with Israel (in the Saudi case) and the desire for 'codified' security commitments (for the UAE).²³

Officials in the UAE have chosen a different approach which reflects the confidence of Emirati policymakers that the country is an influential ‘middle power’ able to hold its own on an inter-regional and global stage. This was evident in the signing of the Abraham Accord with Israel in September 2020 in which the agreement signed by the UAE was more substantive than those signed by Morocco, Bahrain, and Sudan, and included reference to a ‘Strategic Agenda for the Middle East’ that was unique to the Emirati-Israeli accord.²⁴ Emirati policymakers have also engaged with the U.S. and other partners in more focused ‘mini-lateral’ fora, including 12U2 (with India, Israel, and the U.S.), the Negev Forum (with the U.S. and other Arab states which have normalized with Israel), the Somalia Quint (with the U.S., the U.K., Qatar, and Turkey), and the Yemen Quartet (with the U.S., the U.K., and Saudi Arabia).²⁵ Such issue-based tie-ups outside formal institutions have become key elements in the UAE’s approach to foreign affairs, especially in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, areas of growing focus both for the Gulf States (for economic and energy reasons) and the U.S. (connected to power competition and strategic rivalry with China).²⁶

New (transactional) order

It may be that the future of relationships between the U.S. and the Gulf States will be based around a set of transactional principles that do not commit or bind the parties to long-term arrangements and represent a more fluid approach to regional affairs. U.S. force posture remains reliant on the Fifth Fleet headquartered at Juffair in Bahrain and the forward headquarters of Central Command at Al-Udeid airbase in Qatar, both of which have expanded in recent years. American officials acknowledge that the Combined Air Operations Centre at Al-Udeid cannot be replicated elsewhere and is ‘the most sophisticated air-operations hub ever built and the nerve centre of CENTCOM’s air operations.’²⁷ A second U.S. airbase in Qatar, Camp As-Saylihah, shut in 2021 but that closure was related to a shift in military resources following the Afghan withdrawal. This was a reminder that levels of U.S. deployments in the region during the ‘forever wars’ could not be sustained indefinitely and would revert to a ‘new’ norm, which may have fed perceptions of a drawdown.²⁸

That said, the Saudi-Iran agreement in March 2023 to restore diplomatic relations, which was announced in (and by) China and greeted with cautious support by U.S. officials, may be a harbinger of what a more variegated relationship might look like, with greater flexibility to rethink and reorient interests and policies. A stronger but narrower technocratic focus on shared areas of interest could help to insulate U.S.-Gulf relationships from the types of political pressures and uncertainties which have generated the perceptions of drift and disengagement, but ‘taking politics out’ of the equation may not be easy to do in practice and might add to the layers of mutual misunderstandings or grievance, as with the U.S. pressure on the UAE over its relations with China and with the flow of Russian capital and business interests into Dubai since February 2022.²⁹

In the other direction, as the Gulf has seen a de-escalation of tension since 2021, officials have leveraged what influence they have to contribute more proactively to broader security initiatives. Omani officials have kept open indirect channels of dialogue between the U.S. and Iran and also between Saudi and Houthi representatives in Yemen.³⁰ Qatari mediators have worked intensively alongside U.S. and Egyptian counterparts in efforts to secure the release of hostages taken by Hamas during their attack on Israel in October 2023, and for a ceasefire in Gaza.³¹ Saudi and Emirati officials engaged differently as they sought to leverage their relationships with Russia to facilitate prisoner exchanges and other measures to mitigate the impact of the war in Ukraine.³² The occasional releases of prisoners may only have amounted to pinpricks in the most serious conflict in Europe since World War Two, but they illustrate that, for all the political tensions over the Gulf States’ reluctance to be drawn into picking sides, the ability to maintain contacts and balance relationships is conducive to diplomatic initiatives in an otherwise polarized world.

Houthi attacks on maritime targets in the Red Sea have nevertheless highlighted the delicate balancing act facing Gulf States as the deadliest war between Israelis and Palestinians since 1948 threatens the de-escalation dynamic in regional politics prior to October 7, 2023.

Memories of missile and drone attacks against Saudi cities and infrastructure (between 2015 and 2022) and against Abu Dhabi (in 2022) remain fresh in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Especially as Vision 2030 passes its halfway point, having been launched by Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, and the ‘giga-projects’ along Saudi Arabia’s Red Sea coastline move into the construction and delivery phase, ‘de-risking’ has become a priority for the Saudi leadership as they try to attract foreign investors and visitors.³³ Officials are mindful of the optics that went around the world during the Saudi Grand Prix in March 2022 when the Formula One race in Jeddah took place against the backdrop of black smoke billowing from a nearby oil storage facility struck by the Houthis the day before.³⁴

Policy responses to the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea which began in November 2023 and triggered a U.S.-led response in January 2024 indicated the careful balancing

act at play in the Gulf. Bahrain was the only Gulf State to be named as a participant in *Operation Prosperity Guardian*, the multinational coalition which was formed in December 2023 to respond to the attacks on maritime targets. Moreover, Bahrain did not take part in the kinetic ship- and air-based operations, and it was notable that the airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen did not involve U.S. or British forces based in the Gulf. Instead, the strikes were launched from bases in Cyprus, the U.K., and the U.S. itself, thereby minimizing the risks to the Gulf States from blowback either from Iran or by Iranian-aligned groups. This may be a harbinger of a new approach to U.S.-GCC relations in which security and defense cooperation continues on a technocratic basis even as there is greater elasticity in political positions, and a more transactional and flexible approach to U.S.-Gulf relations may ease the shift to a new configuration of international power with multiple poles of political gravity.

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American Order: Palestine and Authoritarianism in the Arab World

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According to David Lake (2018), the international order “is the product of incentives for state-to-state hierarchy, the interests of the dominant and subordinate states— especially the distance between their policy preferences,” But it isn’t only power and preferences: the international order depends on “international legitimacy” as a “social construct dependent on the beliefs of many individuals in subordinate states” (Lake 13). The international order furthermore operates differently across regions, in some cases relying on legitimacy and invitation by domestic actors, and in other cases relying on coercive control and authoritarian alliances. Lake identifies the Middle East and North Africa region in particular as a place where American hierarchy necessitated the latter, rather than the former.

Lake’s argument has been corroborated in a variety of ways, and across a variety of dimensions. Amaney Jamal, in an assessment of pro-democracy sentiments in the region, concluded that American intervention had the negative impact of creating *support for* authoritarian status quos (Jamal 2012). In a similar vein, Andrew Stravers and I, in our examination of American military basing, concluded that the US relied on “strategic autocracy” for its objectives in the MENA region (Stravers & El Kurd 2020). Studies on American-backed regime change, war on terror policies, and democracy promotion have found similar results: the US has directly or indirectly supported and reproduced authoritarianism in the region to support its own interests.

Such a finding is not a surprise for those who have followed MENA politics. However, there is an understudied factor in creating these dynamics, one that has often eluded political scientists: the role of Palestine. The Palestine question – and America’s position on the matter in its unqualified support for Israel – has long shaped the American relationship to the MENA region. To uphold the

American-Israel relationship, the US has consistently relied on authoritarian alliances and blocked the development of accountable governance. The Palestine question has also influenced anti-authoritarian resistance to these dynamics and has always played a crucial role in waves of mass protest and dissent.

In this essay, I will outline the ways in which the Palestine question continues to shape American policy in its support for authoritarian regimes, and proliferation of authoritarian practices. I will also demonstrate the ways in which Palestine, historically, was a crucial factor in understanding anti-authoritarian politics in the region. Today, in the shadow of genocide in Gaza, Palestine may also become – paradoxically – a conduit to anti-American and pro-authoritarian sentiment both in the region and in the global North.

American policy and authoritarian practices

The link between American foreign policy and authoritarianism in the MENA region is long-standing and well-corroborated. During the last two administrations, this linkage went beyond military and intelligence engagement, or war on terror policies. In ways that remain unacknowledged by US officials and the DC establishment, the push for Arab-Israeli normalization (or “peace” deals) under the rubric of the “Abraham Accords” process have accelerated this linkage as Washington pushes Arab states to adopt policies which are deeply unpopular with populations increasingly mobilized by the Palestinian issue (El Kurd 2024).

Arab-Israeli normalization, and the extent to which the US has made the policy a center point of its regional strategy, has been critical for two main reasons. First, Arab-Israeli normalization deals – the Abraham Accords

and subsequent cooperation such as the Negev Forum – have increased the integration of the Israeli state into the regional authoritarian order. Arab-Israeli cooperation over shared threats, such as Iran and its proxies and, oftentimes, the perceived radicalizing effect of the Palestinian question, has reached unprecedented levels.

Second, Arab-Israeli normalization deals have also provided Arab regimes the tools and discourses needed to consolidate authoritarian control over their own citizens. To be sure, Israel is not the *only* source of repressive technology. Nevertheless, increased and formalized ties with the Israeli state have allowed regimes in the UAE, Morocco, and Bahrain to have access to surveillance technology and to launch initiatives for the development of repressive tools (Fatafta 2021). The very well-known example is the use of Pegasus software to target dissidents, but this is just one instance. Many such technologies exist, and Arab regimes are gaining or developing access to them in a variety of ways. Companies such as Dark Matter – based in the UAE, staffed by Israeli & American intelligence experts – are such an example, and have a tangible effect on authoritarian conditions in the UAE itself and around the region. As investigative reporting has since repeatedly confirmed, such initiatives have targeted not only foreign governments at odds with these regimes, but local dissidents and journalists as well.

Perhaps more detrimental to long-term conditions in the region are the propaganda and misinformation efforts of these regimes in the lead up to, and aftermath, of Arab-Israeli peace deals. Propaganda and misinformation, and the attempt to impose a particular discourse around government policies, are an authoritarian practice because they “sabotage accountability to people...over whom a political actor exerts control” (Glasius 2018). Because Arab publics are consistently in support of the Palestinian cause and see an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict tied to the issue of Palestinian self-determination, regimes pursuing normalization deals recognize that these will be deeply unpopular. As a result, they engage in propaganda and misinformation efforts, and police speech, in order to enforce a particular discourse around the deals and silence critique.

In the case of the Abraham Accords signatories, in particular the UAE, this propaganda and misinformation has centered on two main arguments: first, that Palestinians are nefarious and violent actors that do not deserve support and have indeed misled the Arab publics, and second that Arab-Israeli peace is a way of promoting “tolerance” and advancing Arab societies culturally (El Kurd 2023). Arab-Israeli peace deals have been painted as a way in which benevolent Arab governments can modernize their societies, beyond antiquated notions of intra-Arab solidarity or support for Palestinian self-determination.

Such propaganda and misinformation efforts are supported by American policy and resources. For instance, organizations such as the Abraham Accords Peace Institute, a US-based NGO headed by a former Trump administration official and staffed by former Israeli bureaucrats, assists Arab regimes in building out and disseminating this narrative within Arab states and in Washington DC. US embassies in signatory countries and in Israel have also lent their support to Arab-Israeli initiatives, such as by funding the UAE-Israel Business Council or the Gulf-Israel Women’s Forum that brings together Israeli policymakers with Arab businesswomen and policymakers.

Criticisms of these initiatives or, indeed, the entire framing of Arab-Israeli normalization as peace, are deemed “intolerant” or antisemitic. Journalists, writers, and activists who have criticized ongoing normalization in the wake of increased Israeli aggression in Palestine, or who have pinpointed the problem not in the “intolerance” of Arab societies but rather the violence of the Israeli state, have been reported on, banned from travel, and in other ways repressed and silenced.

American support for Arab-Israeli normalization deals thus facilitates the development of these authoritarian practices and worsening authoritarian conditions in the signatory countries and the broader region where these regimes have reach.

Palestine and anti-authoritarianism

Palestine is a key factor in understanding anti-authoritarian dissent in the MENA region, not only because of the recent trends in Arab-Israeli normalization. Using the case of Qatari pro-Palestine activists, I previously argued that Palestine is a “gateway to dissent” because the issue had three main impacts on citizens of Arab countries: “1) introducing activists in their formative years to the idea of political agency, 2) providing a space to engage in citizenship-building practices, and 3) generating spillover effects in the personal development of activists as well as in civil society more broadly” (El Kurd 2022).

Moreover, oral histories of the Arab Spring provide a great deal of evidence to suggest that these dynamics are not specific to Qatar or the Arab Gulf states but are in fact replicated consistently across the region (Butland 2022). Activists involved in the January 25th uprising in Egypt, for example, cited Palestine consistently (and the 2nd intifada in particular) as the key factor in their politicization. Those same activists later on went to found and participate in key organizations, such as the Kefaya movement, the Revolutionary Socialists, the April 6th movement, and more.

It is indeed this very issue that made the pro-democracy movements first concerning to the Israeli state, and second less than enticing to American policymakers. Moreover, American support for Israel and Arab authoritarian regimes aligned the US with the pro-authoritarian camp by the estimation of Arab activists. Thus, anti-American sentiment often stemmed from an anti-authoritarian political position.

In the decade since the Arab Spring, polling has regularly corroborated that citizens of the region remain very pro-Palestine and opposed to Arab-Israeli normalization policies without a resolution to the Palestinian question (Arab Opinion Index 2022; Arab Opinion Index 2024). Palestine is thus a clear point of divergence between Arab regimes and their societies. Often, when political opportunities arise, the issue of Palestine leads to dissent

and mobilization against regimes on a wider scale than anticipated.

In the shadow of genocide

The impact of the Palestine question on anti-authoritarian politics has taken a turn, however, in the shadow of genocide in Gaza. In particular, the Palestine issue has become a conduit for renewed anti-American sentiment but is no longer necessarily intertwined with anti-authoritarian politics. Instead, the genocide in Gaza has demonstrated to a significant segment of citizens in the region, and indeed across the globe, that the US is willing to squander its limited legitimacy as an actor that – theoretically – could be swayed to support democratic practices, in exchange for continued Israeli dominance at all costs. In this context, the arguments of the axis of resistance, in particular Russia, Iran, and its proxies, have seemed to bear fruit.

As a result, polling shows not only a precipitous decline in positive sentiment towards the US, but initially also a bump in support of Iran and its regional project (Robbins et al 2023). This is especially the case because advocates and organizations that demand accountability for Israel’s actions, but are not supported by the Iranian orbit, have been repressed across the broader region, with many pushed into exile.

These trends have faltered more recently, however, as regional conflict has escalated. Iran’s approval rating with the Palestinian public, for instance, has taken a downturn following Israel’s attack on Lebanon and Hezbollah, as well as Iran’s seeming lack of will in responding to Israeli assassinations of Hamas leaders within their borders (Index Poll #93, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research).

In the global north, Palestine has energized young people and student activists who have been involved in campus protests, the Uncommitted Movement within the Democratic Party, and other forms of dissent. Those involved within party politics or attempting to change

policy in DC have been met with a great deal of resistance, however. This has signaled to the broader movement the seeming futility of engaging with formal politics.

As such, for a segment of the pro-Palestine movement, this moment in which genocide unfolds has also resulted in the legitimization of anti-American pro-authoritarian actors and organizations – those aligning themselves (or implicated with) regimes in Russia, Iran, and China, as well as far-right elements within the US. For instance, the rise in popularity of individuals such as Jackson Hinkle, Jill Stein, and Aaron Mate among pro-Palestine organizations and advocacy groups is evidence of this sort of legitimization. Moreover, the proliferation of a Marxist-Leninist framework among key youth organizations, focused on American imperialism as the target of opposition, has also allowed space for actors associated with American adversaries to weaponize this moment and gain traction. Thus, we see glorification of actors such as the Houthis and Hezbollah, and apologism for the human rights violations of authoritarian regimes across the globe. In this way, Palestine has become a gateway to *pro*-authoritarian dissent in some quarters, as a direct result of the intransigence of the American position, especially throughout the unfolding genocide.

Conclusion

In these various ways, the Palestine question continues to shape American policy in its support for authoritarian regimes, and proliferation of authoritarian practices. Today with the ongoing genocide in Gaza, US dismissal of the Palestinian question has not only eroded its own legitimacy but has also created a sort of bandwagoning effect with authoritarian actors in pursuit of the erosion of an American-dominated world order. This bodes poorly for authoritarian conditions in the region long-term and increases the likelihood of violent conflict in Israel/Palestine.

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The Gulf States in the Multipolar Transition

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For over two decades, the United States enjoyed its place on top as the leading hegemon in a unipolar world.¹ The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 brought an end to the bipolar power struggle that sustained the Cold War, and ushered in a liberal global order led by the United States as the world's sole superpower.² In the following years, Washington used its soft power, economic strength, and military might to expand this order, including through new multilateral institutions that it spearheaded including NATO and the World Trade Organization.³

Thirty-five years later, the foundations of this order are in disarray. While the United States maintains its military, economic and technological might, China's growing economic dominance and Russia's efforts to restore its superpower status, coupled with the rise of a range of assertive medium-sized powers, are creating the conditions for a return to the kind of multipolar distribution of power that was the norm until the mid-twentieth century.⁴ Amidst this reshuffle, the United States finds itself further weakened because of a crisis of ideological legitimacy of its own making. Western policy makers, most of whom came of age during the unipolar era, are struggling to keep up.

A key feature of the transition to multipolarity is the rise of what we call multipolar entrepreneurs: states leveraging the changing global landscape to extract benefits from different sides and protect their own interests. Washington views these states in the same way as it did during the Cold War: as gateways for the expansion of rival ideological powers. Underlying this thinking is an enduring American confidence that the power distribution of the mid- and late twentieth century can eventually be restored, and that the right enticements can bring its partners back into alignment. Yet a closer look into the behaviour of these multipolar entrepreneurs suggests that their calculations have changed, and a return to the dynamics of the past century is unlikely.

In the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the UAE embody the kind of manoeuvring characteristic of multipolar entrepreneurs. Once seen as beholden to the United States policy in the Middle East, these states are pursuing their own national interests with greater assertiveness. Both states are establishing closer ties with America's great power rivals, China and Russia, and intervening in conflicts without U.S. backing or consent, all while seeking to extract expanded American security guarantees. To leaders in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, these moves are a logical response to the new menu of available options presented by the global power transition, and to a partner in Washington whose behaviour they see as having become unreliable over the past two decades.

As the rivalry between the United States and China grows, these middle powers are taking advantage of an increasingly competitive global landscape to leverage their interests. U.S. officials view their recalibrated policies as inconvenient, but there is no way back to the unipolar or even bipolar status quos of the past. Instead, Washington should understand their shifting stances as a consequence of a global transition to multipolarity and adapt its policies towards this emergent class of "multipolar entrepreneurs".

The Turn to Multipolarity

The Gulf region is both the epicentre of multipolar entrepreneurship today and the place where the unipolar moment began unravelling. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and ousted President Saddam Hussein from power. The invasion took place despite the refusal of the United Nations Security Council to authorise the use of force, and came after multiple warnings from America's Gulf partners that the invasion would have disastrous consequences for the region. Instead of laying the groundwork for a flourishing democracy, as American officials had hoped, the invasion unleashed a violent

civil conflict and opened the doors for Iran to gain a new foothold in the weakened Iraqi state, all while undermining Western claims to promote the rule of law.

The invasion of Iraq upended regional perceptions of the United States and weakened its ideological appeal. America's 1990 intervention to liberate Kuwait from Saddam, for all its unpopularity elsewhere in the Arab world, earned it an outpouring of genuine support among Gulf leaders and citizens alike. But the 2003 invasion yielded the opposite outcome, with irreparable damage done to Washington's image from an outraged Arab citizenry that saw the intervention as an imperialist oil grab. Regional leaders viewed the invasion as a reckless miscalculation which demonstrated both the damage the United States was able to wreak abroad, and the limits of American power.

Other events would chip away at another pillar of U.S. power: its economic strength. The financial crisis of 2008-2009 changed global perceptions of the reliability of unfettered capitalism and a globalized, dollar-based economy. The foreclosure of one in fifty-two homes during the crisis further eroded the American middle class, a process that had begun with the enactment of NAFTA in the 1990's and a slow shift of manufacturing jobs away from the United States. Beijing's rise as a powerhouse for cheap manufacturing, enabled by its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 at the United States' insistence, cemented the decline of American manufacturing, and turned China into the world's largest producer of goods and buyer of raw commodities.

Diverging Interests

Amidst these shifts, the foundational interests of the United States and the Gulf states increasingly diverged. Since the 1940s, the basis of ties between the U.S. and its Gulf partners, especially the United States and Saudi Arabia, has been the "oil for security" pact, which promised an exchange of cheap oil from the Gulf, in return for American security. In 2011, this pact began fraying as

the United States became a net exporter of oil for the first time in decades. While Washington remained dependent on Saudi Arabia to set an acceptable baseline price to American consumers at OPEC, U.S. dependence on Saudi oil was no longer an existential one. Much of the demand for Gulf's oil no longer comes from the United States, but from China.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are also adopting more activist foreign policies, outside the framework of US coordination. This became evident most clearly during - and in the aftermath of - the Arab Spring, when both players intervened in states across the region to prevent the rise of political Islam and groups they deemed supportive of Tehran, which they feared might someday threaten their authority. Both had a hand in the 2013 coup that ousted Egypt's first democratically elected President and went on to intervene in subsequent civil conflicts in Libya, Syria, Sudan and Yemen. While they sometimes act at odds, they share a common aim. They want, according to a U.S. official, to "shape the region in their image", by supporting the rise of authoritarian, highly securitized, anti-democratic currents.

Perhaps more frustratingly, from Washington's perspective, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are at times reluctant to discuss what they are doing in the region with their American counterparts. For even seasoned American observers, this entrepreneurialism feels like a betrayal from states that have benefited enormously from U.S. patronage. But officials in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, reflecting on two decades of U.S. policy in their neighbourhood, see themselves as partly filling a vacuum generated by what they see as U.S. reluctance to take a more active role in the region, a perception heightened by repeated declarations from US presidents since Barack Obama of an intent to drawdown from the region and move US military assets to other parts of the globe. For all its talk of supporting the Gulf states, the Trump administration largely doubled down on this policy, fuelling a perception of vulnerability among Gulf leaders and fuelling their desire to take matters into their own hands.

The ideological challenge

As the United States reckons with its future in a transforming global landscape, it faces a deepening crisis of legitimacy that is further eroding another aspect of its power: its ideological authority. As Stacie Goddard notes in this volume, the United States justifies its hegemony “through the language of the international order” telling itself and the outside world that its power is not only legitimate but desirable, because it is deployed to expand the universal liberal values that all rational individuals desire. Washington openly disregards these values in practice, whether by cosyng up to dictators where they further its interests, or by intervening in other states whose leaders do not. Washington’s failure to abide by the values that it champions as the basis for its authority - made especially glaring in 2024 through its refusal to condition military or political support for Israel as it carries out systemic war crimes in Gaza - increases charges of “whataboutism” by state leaders and undermines international support for its foreign policy.

This crisis of legitimacy weakens U.S. soft power and provides new inroads for its rivals. Chinese officials have come to see the United States as drunk on power and complacent in its spot at the top. They assail the United States for imposing its political model on others, and label American democracy, human rights and freedom of speech promotion as a form of colonialism. Instead of dictating to other global powers, China promises more even and transactional interactions, offering new opportunities for trade and cooperation that did not come with political conditions or possible threats of military intervention. When Saudi Arabia signed its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement with Beijing in 2022, a key commitment from the two sides was towards a principle of “non-interference” in the internal affairs of the other, long a source of complaint from Gulf officials towards the United States.⁵ Russia has codified similar promises in its promotion of “sovereign democracy”, a model it sees as challenging the Western democracy-promotion agenda.⁶

Multilateralism is challenging American hegemony and dominance on the world stage. In 2009, the BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) came together to form a new economic alliance, aimed at representing the concerns of the Global South in a multilateral system dominated by Western states. Together, the five powers worked to become what China and Russia posit is a new rival to the U.S.-led G-7, including by coordinating on trade policy. The BRICS states are already trading in their own currencies, weakening the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions. During its 2023 summit, the BRICS group announced plans to include six new members, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, setting the stage for expanded cooperation between an even bigger network of actors.

From an American perspective, Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s actions are an indicator that they are “going over” to the Chinese side. But Gulf officials see things differently. They believe that mounting geopolitical competition, and a more diffuse distribution of global power, are an opportunity to seek the most from all sides, and to expand their own influence. China, India, Russia, and other BRICS countries represent a growing share of global consumption, and income from oil sales. For this reason, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh no longer see themselves as beholden to the United States’ interests but as players at the heart of the global economy. Over time, they believe that the US will eventually shift its posture from demanding hegemon, to one of a begrudging equal. In the meantime, they are willing to leverage U.S. fears that they are falling into China or Russia’s orbits by seeking defence guarantees from Washington.

Saudi Arabia’s recent policies illustrate its balancing act. When President Biden travelled to Riyadh in July 2022 to urge Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to ramp up oil production in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Crown Prince rebuffed the President by joining hands with Moscow to slash oil production at OPEC. The move earned Saudi Arabia and other oil producers windfall profits. That year, Riyadh announced plans to establish a Chinese drone factory in the Kingdom, and signed the Comprehensive

Strategic Partnership Agreement that included preliminary deals valued at \$30 billion.⁷ A GCC-China Free Trade Agreement is reportedly nearing completion. Saudi Arabia has also given China inroads into Middle East diplomacy, once the near-exclusive domain of the United States. When the Kingdom restored its relations with Tehran in early 2023 after a seven-year hiatus, it was Beijing that acted as public broker to the agreement.

Saudi Arabia's perceived turn to Beijing triggered a renewed push by American officials to broker a mega-deal that offered Saudi Arabia a defence pact in exchange for halting its security cooperation with China and entering a normalisation agreement with Israel. In bilateral talks with Washington, Riyadh conditioned accession to the Abraham Accords – the normalization deals the U.S. brokered between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco - on long-term binding security guarantees akin to a NATO Article Five security pact, and access to advanced American anti-missile technology, which it sees as vital to its long-term security. Saudi Arabia has also asked for some concessions to the Palestinians in the form of a “pathway” towards statehood, a nod to its historic leadership on the issue.⁸ The American sense of urgency, and its willingness to meet Saudi demands, increased as the conflict in Gaza escalated into a regional conflict over the past year. Amidst expanding turmoil, Washington still hopes that it can bring its Gulf Arab partners into closer alignment with Israel and deepen the foundations of a US-backed anti-Iran alliance.

The United Arab Emirates arguably set the template for Saudi Arabia's strategy. In late 2021, reporting from the Wall Street Journal suggested that Abu Dhabi was preparing to host Chinese military facilities.⁹ Outcry from American officials prompted the UAE to announce that it had halted construction on the site. But by early 2023, leaked intelligence documents appeared to suggest that plans for its development may have resumed. While the United States has urged its partners to help isolate Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine, the UAE instead opened its doors to a flood of Russian money and quickly rose to become a key trading hub for Moscow.¹⁰ By 2022,

trade between the two states grew by nearly seventy percent from the previous year to a record \$9 billion. The UAE's refusal to choose sides has also enabled it to expand its diplomatic footprint by mediating prisoner swaps between Russia and Ukraine.

The UAE is also using its accession to the Abraham Accords as part of its bargaining strategy. In September 2024, even as U.S. officials bemoaned the UAE's role in Sudan's civil war and its facilitation of Russian oil exports, President Biden announced that he was making Abu Dhabi a major U.S. defense partner. Part of the reason for the move, according to U.S. officials, was the UAE's willingness to coordinate a regional effort to develop a “day after” plan for governing Gaza, something Israel has thus far refused to seriously contemplate.

The two countries are exploiting a mismatch in expectations about the future. U.S. officials still believe that the Gulf states' primary security concern is Iran. As a result, they think they can exploit Emirati and Saudi fears over its regional ambitions to persuade them to remain within the American sphere of influence and integrate them into a regional security framework built around cooperation with Israel. Abu Dhabi and Riyadh certainly see Iran as a critical security threat. But they believe the Iranian threat is best mitigated through a mix of defence pacts, diplomacy and economic inducements to Tehran facilitated by Moscow and Beijing. This perception stems largely from the fact that they see the United States as not having done enough to protect them from Iranian retaliation in the past.¹¹

From a Saudi and Emirati perspective, this approach has paid off handsomely. Since Hamas' October 7th attacks, and Israel's reprisal, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have avoided becoming embroiled in an escalating regional conflict between Israel and Iran. They have also avoided being targeted by Iran-backed groups as happened during the maximum pressure era when these states faced the brunt of Iran's reprisal for President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA. As it seeks a plan for regional stabilization, meanwhile, the U.S. has become more

focused than ever on securing long-term alliances with the Gulf states, allowing them to increase the asking price for cooperation – and to avoid scrutiny for their own misdeeds.

A Global Shift

Whether U.S. officials like it or not, multipolar entrepreneurship is becoming evident among many of America's established allies the world over. While a state like Pakistan is a vital security partner for the United States, it has placed itself at the heart of China's economic plans. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor - a 3,000-kilometre Chinese infrastructure network project that establishes a sea and land-based corridor across the state - is the flagship of Beijing's Belt and Road

Initiative, enabling China to reduce the cost and transit time for Chinese energy imports from the Middle East. Although Turkey is a member of NATO, its economic ties to Russia have grown in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And while the United States announced plans to invest \$200 billion in Indian technology corporations and infrastructure in early 2023, New Delhi continues to acquire nearly half of its weapons from Russia.¹² For an array of states caught in the middle of great power competition, the choice is not about picking sides but rather playing these powers off each other to gain the most leverage, and choices. For the United States, dealing with these new realities is an unwelcome but inevitable part of preparing itself for a new global order in which it no longer exclusively dictates the rules of the game.

Endnotes

- ¹ For more on the changing role of the United States in the global order, see the papers by Gregory Gause and Daniel Nexon in this collection
- ² In 1992 Francis Fukuyama infamously argued that the ascendance of liberal democracy and dissolution of the Soviet Union marked the “end of history”; and the “universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” See: F. Fukuyama, “The End of History and the Last Man” (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
- ³ Critics of the United States' foreign policy have long pointed to the gaps between the United States professed commitment to values of human rights and democracy, and its disregard for these values in practice. See, for example: N. Chomsky, “Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance” (New York: Holt Publishers, 2004).
- ⁴ S. Walt, “The US is too Scared of the Multipolar World”, *Foreign Affairs*, 07 March 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/07/america-is-too-scared-of-the-multipolar-world/>
- ⁵ “China, Saudi Arabia issue joint statement”, Xinhua News Agency, 10 December, 2022, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202212/10/content_WS6394234bc6d0a757729e44ba.html#:~:text=The%20two%20sides%20reiterated%20that,basic%20norms%20governing%20international%20law
- ⁶ Anirban Chatterjee, ‘Sovereign Democracy: Russian Response to Western Democracy Promotion in the Post-Soviet Space’, *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 27, 2, 2023.
- ⁷ Rawan Radwan, ‘Saudi Arabia, China emerge as comprehensive strategic partners as Chinese President Xi Jinping wraps up state visit’, *Arab News*, 10 December 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2213756/saudi-arabia>
- ⁸ M. Crowley, V. Nereim, and P. Kingsley, ‘Saudi Arabia Offers its Price to Normalize Relations with Israel’, *New York Times*, 11 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/us/politics/saudi-arabia-israel-united-states.html>. See also: E. Fakhro, ‘The Abraham Accords: the Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization’ (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).
- ⁹ G. Lubold and W. Strobel, ‘Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations with UAE’, *Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>
- ¹⁰ N. Smagin, ‘Is the Blossoming Relationship Between Russia and the UAE Doomed?’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 April 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/04/is-the-blossoming-relationship-between-russia-and-the-uae-doomed?lang=en¢er=global>
- ¹¹ This way of thinking is in part the product of a wave of Iran-backed attacks on the two countries between 2018 and 2022 and what the Gulf states saw as American indifference to their plight. In 2019, for example, Iranian-backed Iraqi and Yemeni groups attacked Saudi oil and gas infrastructure and airports in the midst of the then-Trump administration's “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran. Saudi officials were angered by what they saw as a lack of American response to the attack. In 2022, Yemen's Houthis attacked the UAE with drones and missiles. Emirati officials were similarly frustrated by what they perceived as a lacklustre reaction from the Biden administration to “our 9/11”. Believing the U.S. to be a fair-weather friend regardless of the party in charge, each sought détente with Iran. Riyadh eventually turned to China for help.
- ¹² P. Sahu, ‘Yellen: India to be Key Beneficiary of \$200-billion Fund’, *Financial Express*, 27 February 2023, <https://www.financialexpress.com/policy/economy-yellen-india-to-be-key-beneficiary-of-us-200-bn-fund-2992865/>

Hegemony, Unipolarity and American Failure in the Middle East

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Given the overwhelming power position of the United States in the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, both in the Middle East itself and globally, it is striking how unsuccessful American policy in the region has been since the high point of the victory in the Gulf War of 1990-91. The Clinton Administration's inability to secure an end to the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, despite overwhelmingly favorable circumstances, was followed by the post-9/11 failures of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and the post-Arab Spring failures of democratic transition across the Arab world. Many scholars of the region see these failures as evidence of declining American hegemony, in the region, and the world. However, a more accurate theoretical explanation for these failures starts with questioning whether the U.S. was ever "hegemonic" in the region in the first place. Considering the American regional position as "unipolar" rather than "hegemonic" can provide a better explanation for both Washington's behavior as a regional revisionist (a strange stance for a hegemon to take) and its failure to achieve its desired revisions.

The United States as Middle Eastern Hegemon

The idea that the United States was a regional hegemon in the Middle East was broadly accepted by people who study the international politics of the area. The late Michael Hudson, at the time the dean of American Middle East specialists, captured both the reality of American power and the worry that caused in his 1996 review of American regional policy, "To Play the Hegemon."¹ Raymond Hinnebusch, in a widely used textbook on Middle East international relations, termed the period 1990-2010 as "the age of U.S. hegemony" in the region.² The editors of the Middle East Research and Information Project, always skeptical of anything good coming from American policy in the Middle East, titled a 1998 article "Arab Perspectives on US Hegemony in the Middle East."³

Stephen Zunes entitled a contribution to a 2006 edited volume "The United States: Belligerent Hegemon."⁴ Those less attuned to IR jargon used other terms, like primacy or *Pax Americana*, but the intent was the same.⁵ Even Usama bin Laden got in on the game, describing the U.S. as "hegemonic" in private correspondence.⁶

Paradoxically, the focus on hegemony in the analysis of American Middle East policy became more acute as the extent of American failures became clear. How to explain these failures and the resulting instability in the region? It must be declining U.S. hegemony in the region. This is the diagnosis of a number of distinguished scholars of Middle East international relations.⁷ Some of the contributors to this collection also stress the return of multipolarity at the global level and how that encourages hedging behavior among Middle Eastern states.⁸ However, while it is easy (if incorrect) to make the argument that the United States occupied a hegemonic position in the region after the end of the Cold War, it is harder to establish that, from a purely power capabilities perspective, its hegemony is now being challenged. China is beginning to be more involved in regional politics, with its recent mediation efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the PLO and Hamas, but it has almost no military presence in the region. Russia remains a diplomatic spoiler in the Middle East, but it is absorbed in its own war with Ukraine, to the extent of importing arms from Iran for that fight. The U.S. maintains a much broader network of regional allies than either China or Russia. No regional actor can begin to match the resources that the U.S. can bring to bear on the military or economic front.

The scholars cited above tend to explain this anomaly of continued U.S. material power in the region but declining U.S. influence by arguing that the U.S. is choosing to withdraw from management of regional politics. However, the intensity of the U.S. involvement

in the Gaza War, both diplomatically and in terms of military deployments, refutes that contention, as does the continuing American military presence in the Persian Gulf region and the ongoing American campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. If the U.S. retains the capabilities of a hegemon in the Middle East, and still exhibits the desire to manage regional events, can we talk about “declining U.S. hegemony in the Middle East” as the explanation for regional instability?

Hegemony Reconsidered

The commonsense view of hegemony represented in earlier international relations scholarship is that it leads to stability. In fact, in the subfield of international political economy, the common reference was to “hegemonic stability theory.” No subordinate actor has the capabilities to challenge the hegemon, so such challenges would be suicide missions. The hegemon itself is, by definition, a status-quo power, because changes in the status-quo could challenge its hegemony. Hegemony leads to peace, as expressions like *Pax Romana* and *Pax Britannica*, indicate. One of the leading IR theorists of system structure, Robert Gilpin, wrote that hegemony “ensured an international system of relative peace and security.”⁹ In their more recent account of, and argument for, American hegemony, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth argue that “security provided from the outside is likely to make these regions [Middle East, Europe, East Asia] more secure than they would be if security were provided locally.”¹⁰ The IR theorist who has explored the relationship between regional and global system structure in the greatest detail, Benjamin Miller, argues that an outside dominant power, like the U.S. in the Middle East, cannot resolve the state-to-nation problems that lead to regional wars, but it can impose restraint and enforce a “cold peace” on a region.¹¹

If all this is true, why has the Middle East experienced so much violence and instability in the period of supposed American hegemony? Raymond Hinnebusch raises this question very directly: “The weakness of all versions of HST [hegemonic stability theory], exposed by the Iraq

War, is their failure to appreciate that a ‘hegemon’ may be a source of global disorder”¹² He argues that theory has to shift from the systemic level to the state and individual levels in order to distinguish between benign and malign hegemony. However, the idea that a hegemon would seek to change dramatically the circumstances that brought about its own dominant position challenges much of the theoretical literature in IR on hegemony.¹³ A better answer to this question can be found by remaining at the systemic level and delving deeper into the concept of hegemony.

Many IR scholars who have thought deeply about the concept argue that power preponderance is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for hegemony to be present. There also must be an element of acceptance of the leadership of the hegemon among subordinates, a notion of the legitimacy of the order that the hegemon seeks to impose. One of the earliest conceptions of American hegemony in the post-Cold War world emphasized the ideational element that underpinned power predominance. Francis Fukuyama’s thesis in “The End of History?” was that there was no global ideological rival to the American system of democracy and neoliberal capitalism on the world stage.¹⁴

That ideational element underpinning power in hegemonic orders is emphasized by a number of IR scholars. John Ikenberry argues that material power dominance is but one element of a hegemonic order, that must be accompanied by “legitimacy of the rules and institutions of the order” and “functionality,” the ability of the hegemon and its order to solve the problems of the subordinate states.¹⁵ Charles Kupchan says that hegemonic systems “have a distinctive normative character; order emerges not just from hierarchy but also from packages of ideas and rules that inform the nature of a given order and govern social relations in that order.”¹⁶ Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, in their account of the ongoing breakdown of the American hegemonic order at the global level, emphasize that the architecture of a global order is based not simply on power, but also on values, institutions and networks.¹⁷ Stacie Goddard in this collection wonders how the

American support for Israel in the Gaza War will affect the legitimacy of the American-led international liberal order in the eyes of others.¹⁸

The idea of legitimacy as part of a hegemonic order is itself contested in the literature. David Lake, who eschews the term hegemony in favor of hierarchy, emphasizes that the subordinate actors in a hierarchical system get material benefits from the leading actor. Those benefits might be limited to the ruling elites, but they are real and tangible, like support for the continuation of those elites in power. For Lake, the core of a hierarchical order “rests on the largely material exchange of order for compliance and legitimacy.”¹⁹ Legitimacy is the cost of support and is under constant pressure of renegotiation, but it remains a central element of stable hierarchical orders. Ian Clark takes the position that the interests of the subordinates in a hegemonic system are at least in part shaped by the context of the legitimating principles put forward by the dominant power. The subordinates buy into the hegemonic order because they believe in those principles, which then generate their definition of their interests. He contends that there is a need for a “clear delineation between primacy grounded in material resources only and hegemony grounded also in legitimacy. This has been sadly lacking in most IR commentary.”²⁰

The debate in the IR literature on hegemony is ongoing.²¹ However, there is an increasing consensus on the idea that material power alone does not suffice to construct a hegemonic order. Some elements of institutionalization and legitimation are required. Ideas matter, not independent of material power but as adjuncts to that power at a minimum. Here is where the contention that the United States was a hegemonic power in the Middle East in recent decades can be challenged.²² If Fukuyama was correct that American post-Cold War dominance would be underpinned by the lack of an ideological challenger to democratic neoliberal capitalism as an organizing principle for politics, the Middle East stood outside that ideological consensus. The political platform that contends that “Islam is the solution” provided a

ready legitimation formula for challengers to American hegemony. The Iranian revolutionary regime was the most prominent of those challengers, but it was joined both by the non-state actors Iran supports and by salafi jihadist movements on the Sunni side of the sectarian divide, from the Taliban to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The Muslim Brotherhood variant of populist, (somewhat) non-violent Sunni Islamism underpinned Turkish President Erdogan’s independent stances and the unwillingness of Hamas to join the American-led “peace process.” As Daniel Nexon argues in this collection, theories of hegemony have to take account both of counter-order political movements like the Iranian Islamists taking control of governments and of non-state actor challengers to the dominant order.²³

The American effort to organize the Middle East in the post-Cold War period de-emphasized the democratic and liberal capitalist themes that characterized policy approaches in other world areas. Democracy promotion was part of the rationale for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 attacks, but hardly mattered in American policy toward existing allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The brief spurt of interest in regional democracy in the wake of the Arab Spring quickly was replaced by more traditional interests in stability and strategic access. Liberal capitalism was less important economically than the free flow of energy from the Persian Gulf region. The U.S. had the power, but it did not have the ideas around which a more consensual and more stable hegemonic order could be built.²⁴

Unipolarity and American Failures in the Middle East

The fact that the U.S. was never truly hegemonic in the Middle East can help explain the absence of “hegemonic stability” in the region during the post-Cold War period. However, we need a better theoretical lens through which to understand both the American military incursions in the region and their failures. A focus on “unipolarity” provides that lens. Unipolarity is power capabilities dominance without an underlying ideological consensus linking the subordinates and the sole superpower. Leading

IR Realists recognized that the unchecked power of a unipolar actor would lead to the opposite of “hegemonic stability,” to the lack of guardrails or deterrents in the use of power. Robert Jervis wrote in 2009 that “what is most striking about American behavior since 9/11 is the extent to which it has sought not to maintain the international system but to change it.”²⁵ A few years later Jonathan Kirshner emphasized the “hubris” that unipolar powers will inevitably feel: “They will be naturally overconfident and slow to process experiences that suggest anything to the contrary.”²⁶

The most detailed and extended theoretical analysis of unipolarity is provided by the late Nuno Monteiro. He contends that unipolarity “will generate abundant opportunities for war between the unipole and recalcitrant minor powers that do not have the capabilities or allies necessary to deter it.”²⁷ Those recalcitrant minor powers find themselves in a situation of “extreme self-help” [Monteiro’s emphasis], as they have no other great power to seek out for balancing purposes. The unipole can thus use military force against them without running the risk of conflict escalation into war involving other great powers.²⁸ The power differential between the unipole and a recalcitrant minor power is such that the unipole could be tempted to make demands of the minor power that encroach on the latter’s sovereignty or even survival.²⁹ Given this situation, smaller powers left out of the unipole’s regional alliance system will have even greater incentives to try to obtain nuclear weapons, as the ultimate guarantor against attack, thus increasing the unipole’s incentives to launch strikes against them before they can obtain the ultimate deterrent.³⁰

In the case of the post-9/11 United States, we find an understandable (if seriously flawed) incentive for a unipole to act as a revisionist power in a region populated by minor powers, not potential global challengers. Adding in the 9/11 factor to the already existing incentive of securing oil production and transit, we have an excellent explanation for the American wars against Iraq in 1990-91 and 2003 and against Afghanistan in 2001. The American

intervention in Libya in 2011, and its general (if brief) support for regime change elsewhere in the region during the Arab Spring, requires an explanation that combines unipolar hubris with the democracy promotion tradition in American foreign policy. One can argue that the Bush 41 Administration’s conduct of the Gulf War in 1990-91 was an effort to restore a regional status-quo, not revise it. While true, that does not detract from the fact that such a large American military effort against a Soviet treaty ally would have been, if not unthinkable, at least highly unlikely during the Cold War.

In all of these cases the structural condition of unipolarity provides the opportunity for the United States to use force in the Middle East, a region in which during the Cold War its military interventions were infrequent and limited (1958 Lebanon; 1987-88 naval intervention in the Persian Gulf). Presumably, a true regional hegemon would not have to engage in so many military interventions to get its way, yet American military actions in the Middle East greatly increased during the period of its putative hegemony. Moreover, a real regional hegemon would have been more successful in its interventions to change the status quo, as its legitimating ideas would have found much more support in the countries where the hegemon was seeking to revise the domestic status-quo in recalcitrant regional states.

Conclusion: Gaza, Hegemony and Unipolarity

Unipolarity is a much better theoretical lens than hegemony to explain both how the United States came to be so involved militarily in the Middle East during a period in which it had no peer competitors on either the global or the regional levels, and why the United States was such a failure in being able to change the regional status-quo to conform to its own preferences. Unipolarity helps us understand why a supposed hegemon would use military force to change the regional circumstances of its own hegemony. The Islamist challenges in the region to the ideological elements that underpinned the American liberal order elsewhere in the post-Cold War period –

democracy and free market economics – help to explain the failure of American military efforts to reconfigure the politics of the region.

The Gaza War reinforces some key points made above that call into question whether the United States was ever truly “hegemonic” in the Middle East.

Much like Islamist Iran, Hamas completely rejected the American “peace process” in the Arab-Israeli arena. Islamists in general remained opposed to the American effort to bring about Arab-Israeli peace that has been a centerpiece of American policy in the region for decades, despite the overwhelming power that the U.S. exercised in the Middle East.

There are no indications that Hamas considered either the extent of American power in the Middle East or the supposed decline in its regional hegemony as it was planning the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel. Rather, the group seemed to be more focused on internal Israel divisions, the desire to halt Israeli-Saudi moves toward normalization and its own relations with its allies Iran and Hizballah.³¹ This episode of regional instability had little if anything to do with the power position of the U.S. in the Middle East.

Much as Israel resisted (somewhat mild) pressures from the Clinton Administration to negotiate an end to its conflicts with Syria and the PLO in the late 1990’s and 2000, the Netanyahu government largely ignored Biden Administration pressures for a cease-fire in Gaza and against Israeli expansion of the fighting into Lebanon. If the U.S. could not influence its closest Middle Eastern ally on issues of great importance to it, one wonders how it could be considered a hegemon.

While the Gaza War is yet another indication that American hegemony in the Middle East never actually

existed, it also serves as a leading indicator of the decline in America’s unipolar position in the region. Even as it is hard to see either Russia or China right now as a peer competitor to the U.S., Middle East actors are beginning to hedge their bets about where great power competition is heading. It is no surprise that Iran is developing a deeper strategic relationship with Russia, even supplying Moscow with weapons for its war with Ukraine. Tehran was always the leading opponent of an American-organized Middle East. What is more interesting is that a range of American regional allies, including Turkey, Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia, are all seeking good relations with Russia for their own purposes. None have signed on to the American-led bloc opposing the Russian war in Ukraine. Saudi Arabia sought out Chinese mediation to lessen tensions with Iran, leading to the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2023. China’s role as the world’s leading importer of energy has tied all the Persian Gulf oil exporters’ prosperity as much, if not more, to Beijing than to Washington.

In a world where the United States wants other countries to choose between its camp and the camp of the burgeoning China-Russia front, even America’s closest Middle East partners are seeking to hedge. That fact might be less about existing power realities and more about the states’ perceptions of where global power realities will be in coming decades. Regardless, perceptions about power are themselves a power reality. If Middle Eastern leaders believe that American regional unipolarity is crumbling, the edifice will decline all the faster. This suggests that the coming years will see great power competition and regional state maneuvering that might resemble the early years of the Cold War in the Middle East, though without the strong ideological element characteristic of that period. That kind of regional flexibility will test an American foreign policy establishment (and Trumpian counter-establishment) that is used to (mostly) getting its own way in the Middle East.

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Legitimation and hypocrisy in Gaza: implications for the LIO

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The war in Gaza has passed its one year anniversary. Israel's military operations, launched in retaliation for Hamas's brutal attacks on October 7 and intended to eradicate that organization, have now claimed the lives of more than 40,000 Palestinians, most of whom are civilians. Half a million Palestinians face starvation. The World Bank estimates 18.5 billion dollars of critical infrastructure have been lost, most of which are homes.¹ Over one hundred thousand Israelis remained displaced in the country. The war has now expanded into Lebanon, where Israel hopes to weaken Hezbollah.

The organs of international law have weighed in on this war, with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that Israel's actions plausibly fit the definition of genocide and the International Criminal Court (ICC) issuing arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant (as well as several Hamas leaders). Some argue that the ongoing conflict threatens the international order as well. U.S. support for Israel's operations and defense of its ally against the ICJ and ICC, even as it flouts rules governing conduct of war, have fatally undercut the legitimacy of the "liberal international order" (LIO), the series of rules and norms that have guided international relations since at least the end of World War II.² In particular, scholars suggest that, while application of the order has always been problematic, the scale of U.S. hypocrisy in Gaza has irrevocably undermined the order's legitimacy and, as a result, the U.S.'s position as a hegemon in world politics.³

This argument is plausible, but it raises a number of theoretical questions. Why and how does legitimacy matter to hegemony and international order (if it does at all)? Theoretical skeptics would argue that legitimacy has very little impact on order, and that U.S. hegemony rests more on its material power and interests in the region, rather than any commitment to abide by liberal rules and norms. Even for those who place greater weight on

legitimacy, other questions arise: if legitimacy does matter, why does it matter now? This is certainly not that this is the first time that the U.S. has acted against its professed rules and norms. Why would hypocrisy bear costs now? Finally, if this is a moment of delegitimation, what does this mean for U.S. hegemony and the future of the LIO?

Legitimation and liberal international order

IR theorists diverge on their understanding of the so-called LIO. Institutionalists and constructivists argue that, during and after World War II, the United States designed and installed a relatively coherent, fundamentally liberal order.⁴ Substantively, its institutions facilitated the free exchange of goods, currency, and capital across borders. They nurtured compatible domestic institutions that would protect private property and foreign investment, limit impediments to commerce, and root out corruption. The order was also substantively liberal in its aspiration to substitute human reason for power politics, by replacing international anarchy with global governance. In the resulting web of international legal regimes and regulatory agencies, technocrats and judges—not state representatives—made key decisions. Procedurally, the order is liberal, because it relies on rationalized rules and laws, as well as the consent of the govern, as the basis for rule. Through the order's institutions the hegemonic United States wisely bound itself.⁵ The order's contributions to global welfare gave all a stake in its continued vitality, and America's track record of generally playing by the rules rendered the order legitimate.⁶

This narrative of course has its critics. Realists charge that the liberal international order has been a self-serving, and often dangerous, myth. With respect to substance, the hegemonic U.S.'s commitment to a liberal foreign policy has always been thin, and the U.S. has been willing to violate its principles in pursuit of its interests. With respect to procedures, when the United States was not

able to advance its interests through the consent of its international partners, it easily loosened its self-imposed bonds—turning to coercion, shopping in other forums, or simply going its own way. For others, even if there was some sort of liberal order, it was hardly “international,” but instead confined largely to the “Global West.” The colonial and then the post-colonial Global South, including Middle East, was largely if not entirely excluded.⁷ The order’s claim to be “liberal” is “mere rhetoric,” concealing how the order served the private interests of the United States and its allies, not those of the global public.⁸

It may be true that the LIO is rhetorical, but that does not make it any less real. However problematic the LIO is in practice, the U.S. has *legitimated* its hegemony in the language of the liberal international order.⁹ Leaders argued that the U.S. hegemonic order was legitimate because, while it was made possible by power, that power was being used to provide institutions that embodied universal, liberal values all rational individuals desired. Moreover, by pursuing those values through the creation of multilateral, legal institutions, the system rested not only on power, but on transparent and binding rules. From a legitimation perspective, to argue over whether U.S. leaders truly believed in these principles, or whether they consistently applied the order is less important than asking how the LIO has operated as a rhetorical instrument, one capable of mobilizing coalitions behind U.S. strategic aims in the Middle East and elsewhere, and demobilizing coalitions that would act against its interests.

While scholars in the realist and liberal/constructivist traditions disagree about the effects of norms and rules, they widely agree in how this process should be conceptualized. Rules and norms are given and static, and they determine what is considered legitimate and illegitimate behavior, such as the determination of what constitutes a war crime. Realists recognize this, but doubt that these norms have any effect: states avoid certain military strategies, not because they are illegitimate, but because they are ineffective. For liberals and constructivists, these norms socialize actors into legitimate behavior: states come to believe that certain actions constitute war crimes.

In the approach articulated in this essay and in our broader research program, we move from the idea that norms and rules are static and determinative of state behavior, to a position where norms manifest as rhetorical instruments to justify behavior. Legitimation works not through socialization, but through rhetorical persuasion and coercion.¹⁰ In some cases, its appeals to liberal principles are designed to convince audiences at home and abroad to support U.S. policy. On the eve of the Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush addressed Congress, claiming that the United States must support “a new world order. America and the world must defend common vital interests — and we will. America and the world must support the rule of law — and we will!”¹¹ In others, the language of liberal rights is designed to silence opponents. For this reason, the LIO is always likely to be subject to rhetorical contestation, and the simple presence of contestation within an order is not surprising, nor is it necessarily a sign of an order’s decline.¹²

Audiences—especially other states with opposing interests—are unlikely to accept U.S. positions as a given. They will seek to deploy counterarguments that advance their own interests. At times, those arguments will be largely consistent with liberal principles, accepting the broad contours of the order, but arguing over second-order questions, such as the terms of its implementation. At other times, those counter-arguments might become order-challenging, rejecting liberal international principles entirely.¹³

Looking at the LIO through a legitimation lens suggests that hypocrisy is a feature, and not a bug, of the liberal international order. Because legitimation is used strategically, it is always a tool of interest. But this hypocrisy is not necessarily a problem to the maintenance of order. Indeed, as scholars argue, this hypocrisy can have a constraining effect, pulling the actions of the powerful back in line with liberal aspirations.¹⁴ This then raises two theoretical questions. First, if hypocrisy can be constraining and reinforce the order why, in this moment in the Middle East, does it at least appear to be breaking the order apart? And second, is the geopolitical contestation surrounding this war order-consistent or order challenging?

Hypocrisy and the war in Gaza: the end of the “exception”

Hypocrisy has long dogged the LIO. There will always be tension between national interests and universal rules. And in the Middle East, as elsewhere, the U.S. has consistently acted in its interest, even when those interests collide with liberal principles and procedures. At times, leaders have justified their departures with appeals to higher-order principles. The U.S. may have flouted liberal institutions with its war in Iraq in 2003, but it claimed that it did so in order to promote democracy. At other times, leaders have simply remained silent about their hypocrisy. There has been little public comment, for example, on continued relations with Saudi Arabia despite its clear record of human rights violations.

Despite this, the U.S. seems to have largely escaped the costs of its hypocrisy in the Middle East. Both realists and rationalists might argue this is not surprising; rules and norms rarely constrain powerful states. A legitimization approach in contrast suggests that the U.S. has effectively justified its departure from liberal rules and norms in the Middle East through the language of “exception”: the U.S. has been justified in its violation of liberalism in the region, because it faces exceptional circumstances in dealing with the region’s unique challenges. An existing literature argues that liberalism can not only accept, but may even require, departures from normal rules in exceptional moments.¹⁵ When faced with existential threats, be they despotic leaders seeking weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, or terrorists in Syria, departures from liberal practices are warranted.

This is, of course, a problematic argument, one steeped in racialized discourse. Non-white groups are routinely constructed either as a threat to liberalism or as incapable of participating fully in liberal politics.¹⁶ And this discourse of exceptional and existential threats — objective or otherwise — creates moments in which liberal actors can legitimate aggressive, sometimes even brutal, kinds of violence. What we are interested in here is that in Gaza this discourse of the exception seems to have faltered. This

is not for a lack of trying. Israel has justified its operations against Hamas in the language of existential threat, and the U.S. has continued to legitimate its support of Israel as necessary to protect a democratic ally in the region.¹⁷

But the appealing to the exception may not be resonating for a few reasons. This discourse has run into a potent, and now globalized, counter-narrative, where Israel is cast into the role of a settler-colonial oppressor, and Palestinians as the indigenous oppressed. Hamas’s violence, if not justified, becomes comprehensible, and U.S. support for Israel’s campaigns complicit in imperialism. Critics of this discourse rightly point out that it often draws from disturbing anti-Semitic tropes and ignores the complexities of “indigeneity” in the Levant. The point here is not that the post-colonial narrative is objectively true; it is that it has effectively undercut the legitimization of the exceptional, and heightened charges of hypocrisy in the liberal order.

Moreover, the U.S. is in a situation where it is attempting to simultaneously legitimize its support for both Ukraine and Israel. Evidence suggests that these efforts raise significant questions about significant inconsistencies within the rules-based order. As Israel began its campaign in Gaza, one Middle Eastern official pointed to U.S. inconsistency, arguing that “If you describe cutting off water, food and electricity in Ukraine as a war crime, then you should say the same thing about Gaza.”¹⁸ “We have definitely lost the battle in the Global South,” said one senior G7 diplomat. “All the work we have done with the Global South [over Ukraine] has been lost... Forget about rules, forget about world order. They won’t ever listen to us again.”¹⁹

Counter-legitimation: South Africa, Russia, and China

Global rhetorical politics over the war in Gaza have undercut of the liberal international order as well. Today we see the rise of powerful counter-narrators, other great and middle powers that are using their position to challenge the legitimacy of the U.S.’s regional strategy. To be clear, not all rhetorical contestation is order challenging. Contestation, in fact, can reinforce the rules of the order, especially if this contestation is used to bring a wayward

hegemon back in line with its own norms and principles. Moral criticism of the “Oil for Food” program after the Gulf War was designed not to undermine but to reinforce liberal humanitarian principles.²⁰

Current counter-legitimation strategies vary in the extent to which they seek to reinforce, challenge, or perhaps even transform the liberal international order. South Africa’s efforts to bring charges of genocide against Israel to the International Court of Justice is an example of order-consistent contestation: while questioning the legitimacy of Israel’s actions—and those, like the U.S., that lend support—it is relying on institutional tools to press its claims. At the other end of the spectrum is Russia, deploying an order-challenging legitimation strategy. As Russia’s foreign minister complained, the order never had legitimacy: “The rules were never published, were never even announced by anyone to anyone, and they are being applied depending on what exactly the west needs at a particular moment of modern history.”²¹

China, in contrast, is pursuing a mixed strategy. On the one hand, China’s language positions itself as a peacemaker within the rules-based order. Shortly after October 7, China’s foreign ministry announced that “On the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, China has always been on the side of equity and justice. As a friend to both Israel and Palestine, what we hope to see is the two countries living together in peace and enjoying security and growth together.” Beijing brought together Hamas and Fatah to sign an agreement ending their “division and strengthening Palestinian unity,” an effort China’s leaders called necessary to securing a post-war peace. In general, then, Beijing has narrated its efforts as providing the necessary public goods that underpin collective security.

At the same time, China’s leaders represent their efforts as challenging the legitimacy of a liberal order that has perpetuated imperial and hierarchical relations among states. The Gaza conflict, the *Global Times* charged, is the result from “Western colonization and exacerbated by US biased Middle East policies.” As China’s representative to the Hague argued, any “struggle waged by peoples for their

liberation, right to self-determination, including armed struggle against colonialism, occupation, aggression, domination against foreign forces” was legitimate and “should not be considered terror acts.” China’s use of anti-colonial rhetoric and its appeals to self-determination are aimed at two audiences. First, the Global South. For example, the December 2023 readout from the meetings of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, references China’s efforts to shape a narrative that positions it as a leader of the Global South, noting that China was earning “greater moral appeal”, and that “on major issues concerning the future of humanity and the direction of the world, we must take a clear and firm position, hold the international moral high ground, and unite and rally the overwhelming majority in our world.”²² Second, these appeals are designed to resonate with its domestic audience, by invoking the “century of humiliation” and stoking nationalist sentiment.

Conclusion

Do these politics of legitimation matter for the future of the U.S. hegemonic order? The war in Gaza continues, as does U.S. support, which is only likely to strengthen in the incoming administration. There has been little sign that Saudi Arabia or the U.A.E. intend to shift their quiet support of the U.S.; Iran matters more than U.S. hypocrisy. And even if legitimation of the LIO “matters,” it is not determinative: rhetorical politics interact with a number of different causal processes, including material power shifts in ways that make prediction impossible. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that legitimation failures in Gaza are accelerating cracks in the LIO. It has provided a foundation for counter-legitimation, and a movement towards the regionalization of orders. It increases charges of “whataboutism,” which scholars argue undermines both international and domestic support for U.S. foreign policy.²³ All of this suggests that while legitimation may not be determinative, it is a necessary component of mobilization behind an order.

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“Vegas Rules Don’t Apply: Why the United States is Continually Drawn to Engage in the Middle East”

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Ever since Barack Obama won the presidency largely because of his opposition to the war in Iraq, the United States has been trying to extricate itself from intensive engagement in the Middle East. Successive administrations have argued that the United States should pivot, or rebalance, to Asia; empower Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other regional allies to contend with Iran and its proxies; and focus on more important foreign policy priorities, such as deterring China or holding NATO together as the member states deal with Russia’s brazen invasion of Ukraine. Despite the desire to concentrate their efforts elsewhere, four administrations under three presidents have been sucked into the maelstrom of Middle Eastern politics and conflict. This was not due to bad luck or mere coincidence of events; rather, U.S. engagement in the Middle East is not a bug but a feature of the state system in the region. The sooner Washington realizes this reality, the sooner it will be able to create a more enduring policy to deal with the region.

U.S. strategy toward the Middle East deteriorated rapidly after the misguided invasion of Iraq in 2003.¹ Iran reaped by far the largest benefits of the war. Its most dangerous opponent, Saddam Hussein, was driven from power and executed, while a government amenable to Iran’s interests took power in Baghdad. Tehran no longer had to worry about a large-scale conventional conflict on its western border; instead, via the agency of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps it could spread its influence across the region.² Under the capable leadership of Major General Qassem Soleimani, it did just that.³

President Obama took advantage of the lull in hostilities created by the surge of U.S. forces to Iraq in 2007 and 2008 and the seeming goodwill generated by the Arab Spring to remove U.S. troops from Iraq at the end of 2011, when the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated by the

previous administration expired.⁴ It seemed like a good bet at the time; violence had ebbed in the wake of the surge, allowing Obama to fulfil a campaign promise to remove U.S. forces from a misguided war. Unfortunately, the president misread Iraqi politics. U.S. forces were the glue holding Iraq together; when they departed the country, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki felt emboldened to attack his political enemies, most of them Sunni Arabs.⁵ Sunni Arabs, encouraged by the Arab Spring movement elsewhere in the Middle East, formed a protest movement, only to be brutally suppressed by Iraqi security forces that had been trained and equipped by the United States. Left out of power, Iraqi Sunnis gravitated once again to their defenders of last resort, this time in the form of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS.⁶

By the time ISIS forces invaded Iraq in early 2014, Iraqi Security Forces were a hollow shell, commanded by leaders loyal to al-Maliki but with little military competence. As ISIS took over much of northwest Iraq and advanced on Baghdad, panic gripped both the Iraqi government and the international community, which was horrified by the incipient genocide being perpetrated by ISIS fighters on various ethno-sectarian communities.⁷ The Obama administration reengaged, forming an international coalition and committing troops – mostly Special Forces and airpower – to lead an effort to destroy the Islamic State.⁸ In time (and under the next president), this effort would succeed.

The Obama administration, however, sought a more permanent solution to the tensions in the Middle East by negotiating an agreement with Iran, which was edging its way toward the creation of nuclear weapons and the missiles required to carry them to targets in the Middle East and Europe. On July 14, 2015, the administration (along with the other permanent members of the UN

Security Council and Germany as well as the European Union) signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, an agreement that limited Iran's ability to enrich uranium and extend the time required to create nuclear weapons.⁹ But Obama never sent the agreement to the Senate for ratification, knowing it would be dead on arrival. The agreement would only last if Hillary Clinton succeeded him as president, which did not happen.

President Donald Trump came into office with a much different view of foreign policy than his predecessor. He believed that the JCPOA was a mistake, and instead enacted a policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran.¹⁰ In 2018 the Trump administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, anchoring U.S. policy in the region on forcing Iran to cease its destabilizing activities around the Middle East. The administration had some successes, in particular the destruction of the Islamic State, which largely expired with the seizure of Raqqa and Mosul in 2017.¹¹ But the policy of maximum pressure failed to curb Iran's behavior in the region. Indeed, Iran's leaders doubled down on their support for proxy forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen, leading to continuing attacks against U.S. forces and interests in the Middle East.

The Trump administration also brokered the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.¹² In return the Trump administration removed Sudan from its list of state sponsored terrorism and provided it a grant of \$1.2 billion to clear its debt with the World Bank, as well as recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara. The Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to postpone annexation of parts of the West Bank. U.S. policy makers viewed the accords as an alternative to brokering an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty, which was seen as increasingly unlikely given the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Netanyahu administration's firm policy against recognizing Palestinian sovereignty. The inclusion of Saudi Arabia in such an accord, which would include a formal U.S. defense treaty with the Kingdom, would be the final step.¹³ The United States could outsource its Middle East policy to a

new alliance of Israel and moderate Arab states, directed against their common enemy in Tehran.

The Biden administration attempted to resurrect the Iran nuclear accord, but the inconsistent nature of U.S. policy as administrations changed had soured the Iranian regime on diplomacy with the United States.¹⁴ Negotiating a new agreement turned out to be a Sisyphean struggle, one that is now all but dead. Iran has instead focused its energies on the "Axis of Resistance," its network of proxy forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen that it funds, arms, trains, and occasionally directs.¹⁵ U.S. service members have been in the line of fire on bases inside Iraq, even as they train the Iraqi Security Forces to destroy the remnants of the Islamic State, which is in Iran's interests.

After the destruction of the Islamic State, the Middle East seemed to stabilize, allowing the United States to focus its energies elsewhere. Israel attended to its own security by "mowing the grass," launching periodic strikes against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon in response to missile and terror attacks on Israel.¹⁶ But the Iron Dome anti-missile and rocket system significantly lessened civilian losses, reducing the urgency of retaliatory strikes.¹⁷ To the Biden administration, the balance of power in the region seemed stable – or at least stable enough that the United States could focus on building alliances to counter a rising China in Asia and, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, leading NATO and associated powers in countering Putin's designs in Europe.

But Iran never relinquished its goal of dominating the Middle East by proxy. It continued to fund, arm, equip, and train tens of thousands of militia fighters in proxy groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen. These groups did Iran's bidding by attacking U.S. and Israeli targets of opportunity in Iraq, Syria, and Israel, allowing Tehran plausible deniability as to the origins of the strikes. Meanwhile, U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies were fooled into thinking the situation on Israel's borders was stable. Sure, there were attacks, but these were episodic and small-scale and were sustainable if not completely deterrable. As Israeli mowed the grass and diplomats

worked to expand the Abraham accords to include the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United States could focus its energies elsewhere.

The situation changed dramatically on October 7, 2023, when Hamas operatives invaded southern Israeli, killing more than 1,200 Israelis and seizing around 240 hostages – the largest one-day loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust.¹⁸ The Netanyahu administration vowed to destroy Hamas in retaliation and launched a major ground and air incursion into Gaza, killing to date around forty-five thousand Palestinians, perhaps two-thirds of them noncombatants, mostly women and children.¹⁹ The Biden administration initially unconditionally backed Israel and provided arms and ammunition to keep the Israeli Defense Forces supplied, even as President Joe Biden warned Prime Minister Netanyahu about overreaching, as the United States had done in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11.²⁰

Netanyahu refused to heed the warning and has enmeshed Israel in an unwinnable war in Gaza to destroy Hamas. Even if the Israeli Defense Forces prove capable of destroying the military wing of Hamas, the group would eventually resurface as Hamas 2.0 unless Israel embarks on a long-term occupation of Gaza. Given the track record of the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000, which gave rise to Hezbollah, such a policy would prove to be a fool's errand, and unlikely to be supported by the international community, without whose assistance the rebuilding of Gaza will fail.²¹

Iran emboldened its Axis of Resistance – Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and various proxy militias in Iraq and Syria – to attack Israel, target U.S. servicemembers in Iraq, and strike international shipping transiting the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.²² In April 2024, Iran even attacked Israel directly in retaliation for an Israeli strike on an annex of the Iranian embassy in Damascus that killed eight officers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. The strike failed due to robust Israeli and U.S. air defense systems that shot down 99 percent of the 170 bomb-carrying drones, more than 30 cruise missiles, and more than 120 ballistic missiles

launched toward Israel.²³ The United States was once again pulled back into the region, leading a naval task force to keep the sea lanes through the Suez Canal open, delivering humanitarian aid to Gazans, and conducting multiple rounds of diplomacy in an attempt to broker a cease fire in Gaza – the latter two efforts meeting to date with little success. The U.S. Navy is more heavily engaged in the Middle East than it was during the Cold War, which reduces its capabilities and ability to focus on its major peer competitor – the Chinese Navy – in Asia.

The United States today finds itself in a difficult situation in the Middle East. If it remains heavily engaged in the region, it will be able to counter Iranian ambitions, but at the cost of using precious resources it prefers to focus on Asia and Europe. Despite its recent setbacks, Iran will continue to attempt to assert its will across the Shi'a Crescent and beyond. The Islamic regime in Tehran seeks to dominate the world's second-largest oil producing region (the United States took over the first position with the fracking revolution), effectively control a broad swath of the Middle East, and threaten Israeli security. Unfortunately, the Arab states in the region lack the capabilities to counter Iran's ambitions. On the other hand, Israel has successfully decapitated Hamas and Hezbollah and inflicted significant attrition on both organizations. But absent a long-term strategy to stabilize the region, the groups will likely recover. The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, on the other hand, is a major setback for Tehran that has severed the ground line of communication between Iran and Lebanon. Nevertheless, U.S. involvement will be necessary to ensure that the new Syria does not devolve into chaos and bloodshed.

U.S. policy toward the Middle East has gone through several evolutions, none of them successful. Perhaps the best of the lot was President Bill Clinton's dual containment of Iran and Iraq, which was fraying at the edges but kept the two most volatile regimes in the region in check.²⁴ President George W. Bush's policy of democratizing the Middle East after the terror attacks of 9/11, beginning with the invasion of Iraq, failed to either democratize the region or to deter Iran.²⁵ President

Obama's attempt to negotiate with the Iranian regime was short circuited by the election of President Donald Trump, whose campaign of maximum pressure on Iran likewise failed to curb the Islamic regime's focus on regional hegemony.

Because of recent setbacks to Hamas and Hezbollah in Gaza and Lebanon, as well as the seizure of Damascus by rebel groups including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Iran's strategic position in the Middle East has deteriorated significantly. Nevertheless, Iran still has the capability of becoming a nuclear power; its proxy forces still share power with state governments in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen; and it still embraces a de facto alliance with Russia and to a lesser extent with China, providing it major power benefactors and solid diplomatic cover in the UN Security Council.²⁶ It is in Russia and China's interest to keep the United States engaged in the Middle East, for every soldier, jet fighter, and ship deployed to the region is one less available to counter their ambitions elsewhere. Iran's major weakness is its economy, whose growth is held in check by U.S. sanctions.²⁷

The United States is losing international legitimacy by backing Israel, whose campaign in Gaza has resulted in civilian losses and suffering that has exceeded by a wide margin the proportionality expected to be exercised by a warring nation in prosecuting its war aims. The one success the Biden administration had achieved is in deterring a full-scale regional war. This is a transient

success, which will only be made lasting if the United States can broker an agreement to provide massive humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people, end the war, rebuild Gaza, and, ultimately, provide the Palestinian people with a degree of political sovereignty that will cool their desire to attack Israel. Such a long-term agreement seems unlikely at the moment, as both the Israeli and Palestinian people have been traumatized by the war. Instead, U.S. diplomats should focus their efforts on achieving interim steps, such as creating a non-Hamas aligned governing authority for Gaza that can lead to progress on rebuilding the lives of the Palestinian people, allow time for new leaders to arise in Jerusalem and Ramallah, and calm the tensions that have prevented progress on a long-term solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

One thing, however, is clear from the last quarter century of U.S. engagement in the Middle East. Las Vegas rules don't apply: What happens in the region doesn't stay there. U.S. commitment is essential to preventing the Iranian strategic gains, solving Israel's security dilemma, protecting the global commons that run through the Gulf and the Red Sea, ensuring the safe flow of oil from the region to the wider global economy, and creating stability in war-torn Syria. U.S. presidents might wish to rebalance their efforts toward Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, but the dynamics of power in the Middle East ensure that they can only do so by applying resources they wish to use elsewhere.

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Security Contra Development: The US-Jordan Relationship

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Introduction

Questions about the American position in the Middle East today and how it might change are inevitably linked to an historical inquiry. What might change requires attention to the legacies of decades of America's military and financial investment in many regimes in the region. This essay takes up that direction by examining the US-Jordan security relationship and its political economy consequences. Outside of Israel, the American position in Jordan is one of the region's longest and deepest.

In this volume, Curtis Ryan emphasizes a view of external alliances and security pacts as constituting part of the politics around domestic regime coalitions. This essay assumes a similar direction in that how a state or a regime prepares for war and invests in security should not be rendered purely from an external lens but rather as part of ongoing socio-political relations. The US-Jordan relationship in that sense has operated as a regional military arrangement/alliance and at the same time it has evolved into a central component of domestic political structures and powers with broad effects on Jordanian society. The nature and depth of the structuring effects of the US-Jordan relationship go well beyond what IR theorists typically mean by "alliance" and require a different vocabulary and theoretical lens to fully understand its nature and implications as well as the difficulty of breaking it.

The essay first explores the extraordinary level of Jordanian militarization since the 1980s and how that investment in regime focused security (maintenance of Hashemite supremacy) has evolved into a structural impediment or enfeeblement of the country's socio-economic development. Second, the essay offers several ways the American security relationship with Jordan has

been integral to extending and deepening this security/development dilemma. Taken together, these observations offer a different reading of the nature of US foreign policy and regional order in the region.

Jordan as Military Leviathan

It is often overlooked in discussions of militarization in the Middle East that the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is one of the most militarized countries in the world. For decades, the Jordanian state has dedicated an enormous amount of its dwindling public revenues on defense and security related spending. This first came into sharp relief in 1989 when the value of the Jordanian dinar collapsed in just a few days. Chronically high public debt built up from massive weapons purchases in the previous decade cut Jordanians purchasing power by a third overnight, causing protests in several cities and resulting in casualties at the hands of security forces, the first such violence in the Kingdom since the civil war in 1970-71, in which the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) prevailed after nearly a year of devastating combat in the country's cities against armed Palestinian factions.

Today, the JAF (which includes air and sea units) employs around 100,000 to 115,000 personnel to staff several armored brigades, special forces units, helicopters, and fixed wing fighter aircraft. Other publicly reported employment in the state's coercive apparatus includes the Darak, a paramilitary force created in the last decade, totaling around 25,000 to 30,000 armed personnel and another 60,000-armed, local members of the Public Security Directorate. The General Intelligence Directorate (GID), broadly considered one of the most effective intelligence agencies in the region by US officials, does not have public records on its employment but its reach into the levels of political leadership and public service

is assumed by many observers to be significant. In terms then of reported military personnel as a percentage of the total labor force, Jordan (4.2 percent) ranks among the top eight countries in the world and is nearly double the regional average for the Arab world plus Iran (2.2 percent).¹ In sectoral comparison, more Jordanians work for the coercive apparatus than in the manufacturing, construction, mining, and real estate sectors combined, despite these representing key value-added industries.² In fact, tourism contributes nearly 20 percent of Jordan's GDP but accounts for just 54,000 jobs—half the military's manpower.³

This massive land force has required consistently high public investment. In terms of military expenditure as percentage of GDP, Jordan (5 percent) ranks tenth globally, and well ahead of the regional average for the Arab world plus Iran (4 percent).⁴ Moreover, since 1960, roughly two out of every five dinars publicly spent by the Jordanian government – 40 percent of the annual budget – have flowed to the JAF and security institutions.⁵ Yet even these budgetary figures likely underestimate the true cost. For one, official JAF budgetary figures exclude its *capital* expenditures, such as maintenance of weapons systems as well as social spending for military families through pensions, scholarships, and healthcare. International lending agencies are quick to point out that Jordanian public pensions are one of the government's biggest fiscal drags in need of reform; however, the portion devoted to military retirees often goes unremarked. Interviews with local economists and former Ministry of Finance personnel suggest estimates of the military component of total public pensions as high as 60 percent. The GID's budget is of course shrouded in mystery, and some of it is reportedly supported by the US intelligence community. It is not unreasonable to assume that Jordan's true total spending on its coercive institutions may approach at least 50 percent of its national budget in some years.⁶

Fiscal and Developmental Crises

The political economy dislocations from this military effort have been widespread and have impacted almost every

part of Jordanian society. Since the 1989 debt crash, Jordan has suffered from what can be considered a latent fiscal crisis. The Jordanian economy has expanded but overall public revenue (domestic extraction and external grants) has declined steadily while the military commitment has only deepened. Chronic public debt coupled with poor labor security and low employment has intensified the financial shortfalls. From the 1990s onward, austerity spread across the non-security parts of public sector, squeezing education funding, slowing infrastructure upgrades, and opening new avenues for corruption. Much of the country's "economic reform" efforts over those same years—privatizing public assets, cutting the civilian sector, and encouraging labor migration to the Gulf states—are more accurately viewed as mechanisms to cope with the ramifications of fiscal crisis rather than steps toward productive development.

In institutional terms, the growth of security sector has steadily come to overtake many parts of the public sector and encouraged analogous growth into the domestic economy. Different forms of institutional predation by Jordan's security services, while not as advanced as the Egyptian case, has nevertheless evolved in a similar direction with the JAF (and some retired JAF officers) operating private sector enterprises and military-related industries. Since King Abdullah took power in 1999, the JAF has directly entered the commercial economy through lucrative financial ventures, among them secretive real estate deals and an indigenous defense industry.⁷ It has likewise profited from the business of training other Arab militaries,⁸ or even outsourcing its personnel to serve abroad, as in Iraq and Bahrain. With these business interests have come formal reports of corruption with two scandals ensnaring former heads of the GID-- though the spectacle trials ended with little accountability.

While some of these security-development dilemmas might be addressed by technical changes (such as removing GID personnel from public offices),⁹ much of the military sustainment has necessitated enfeeblement of the kinds of investments and skills that nourish broader socio-economic development. American officials

have consistently voiced concern over the Kingdom's socio-economic condition and bemoaned its chronic overspending. At the same time, an array of US security policies has directly and indirectly strengthened those developmental dilemmas, undercutting most Jordanians' view of the legitimacy of the American relationship (See El Kurd in this volume).

The Embeddedness of the US-Jordan Security Relationship

Prior to the emergence of the US-Jordan relationship in the late 1950s, Hashemite reliance on a large land force with British support was already central to Jordanian politics. The argument here positions the US-Jordanian security relationship as an important intervening element in the ability of the Hashemites to extend that militarization in the absence of any reasonable threat to monarchical sovereignty since the 1970s. While the US role in Jordan resembles similar British imperial handoffs to Washington across the global south, the subsequent history of US-Jordan relations was uniquely formative for the state and military. Jordan, like other resource poor Arab states, has periodically benefited from financial support from other patrons, but the long term, programmatic nature of the American relationship was novel. This multifaceted engagement extends beyond just American financing and basing to include different forms of training, education, weapons sales, and joint operations. The consequences for Jordanian politics have been material and non-material.

The most measurable element is of course financial. US economic and military assistance to Jordan typically ranks among Washington's top recipients globally (totaling \$26 billion in economic and military assistance from 1957 to 2022).¹⁰ "More than half of Jordan's annual \$660 million aid package consists of cash grants and other economic support designed to stave off fiscal collapse."¹¹ Much of the direct cash support keeps the Jordanian Central Bank afloat and underpins an overvalued Jordanian dinar, a feat that would not otherwise be possible with Jordan's current account deficit.¹² In some years, significant portions of the military assistance allows the JAF to take

ownership of American weapons, thus easing the regime's fiscal responsibility, yet the service and maintenance expenses remain in many cases.¹³ The largest omission in reported US security assistance, however, is the US intelligence community's support of the GID and its operations.¹⁴ Other direct assistance that has not been clearly captured in the statistics are expenditures from the Defense Department's Overseas Contingency Operations that flowed to different Jordanian security organizations as part of America's wars on terrorism.¹⁵ Financial crisis management has also involved timely financial bailouts and international loan guarantees to stave off insolvency. Ironically, the US Agency for International Development directs much of its assistance budget to the very parts of the Jordanian public sector and social welfare that have been financially strangled due to military spending.¹⁶

Less measurable but very consequential has been the impact of US-Jordanian military-to-military relations. Institutionalized training of the JAF began in the 1970s. Jordanian officers have historically been the largest recipients of the Defense Department's International Military Education and Training (IMET) program in the world. IMET takes foreign officers, with English language skills and typically high service marks, to the US for different types of training. Whole generations of Jordanian generals have cycled through the Army's high-level schools and courses, assignments that sometimes bring families with the officers. Large field training exercises increased in tempo in the 1990s with Jordan eventually hosting the region's largest US exercises called Eager Lion in the 2000s. The growth of extensive US basing in Jordan beginning during the Iran-Iraq war has meant that rotating units of American forces are in frequent contact with their Jordanian counterparts. While open-source accounts are quick to extol the skill of Jordanian special forces or the GID, the same is not said about the JAF's armored brigades, its combat service support, its command and control, or much of the Jordanian air force. Candid conversations with former US advisors see these main parts of Jordan's security institutions as weak or not responsive to decades of training, a consistent view in declassified CIA documents since the 1980s.

Less appreciated however are the effects of decades of institutionalized US training support on the position of the security services in Jordan's socio-political fabric.

“Selection for IMET or analogous programs is deemed highly prestigious within the JAF, so is completion of training programs or participation in joint training... Jordanian generals selected for training in the US are viewed as likely candidates for further promotion... Units selected for training with new American weapons systems are deemed to be the best...There is little career success in the military without consistent engagement with Americans.”¹⁷

These are statements from interviews with JAF and US Army officers on the impact of joint training; however, endogenous socio-political relations should not be discounted as one interviewee emphasized that family and political importance was a main consideration in selecting officers for training. How these dynamics play out in broader Jordanian society are therefore complex and multilayered. Consider that a Jordanian general headed into retirement after 20 years or more of service will have access to a public pension as well as other JAF benefits like housing allowances and university slots set aside for family members. However, that largess pales in comparison to private sector and non-military urban elites with the means to send their children to American and European universities. Not surprisingly, retired officers leverage their security service prestige to open post-career businesses enterprises, some linked to security sector rent income. In the late 1980s, former JAF generals established the country's first “think tank” to emulate then Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies. In the 2000s, the US Army Corps of Engineers constructed the King Abdallah Special Operations Training Center, which is privately owned and trains militaries from around the world for profit.¹⁸ In one sense, these material and non-material arrangements amount to the kinds of crowding out commonly attributed to high military spending. However, these networks should also be appreciated for what they have generated; the embeddedness of American security assistance within Jordanian society.

The JAF and GID's participation in multiple American military interventions constitutes another important legacy of the military-to-military relations. The Monarchy signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, joined the post-9/11 War on Terror by participating in extraordinary renditions and other operations, while also facilitating the 2003 US-led Iraq War. Jordanian personnel have participated in joint American combat operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. While some of these operations have ended in tragedy or exposed corruption within the security organizations, these “blood sharing missions” are highly valued by American and Jordanian leaders. Given the heavy recruiting footprint of the JAF in parts of Jordanian society, the military is viewed positively by large segments. Public acknowledgement of these Jordanian operations however has long been seen as sensitive by the political leadership. Nevertheless, it can also work as a subtle justification for continued military investment as Jordanian officials also advertise their US relationship to frame the Kingdom as an “oasis” of stability in a tumultuous region.

The 2022 US-Jordanian aid agreement signaled how eagerly Washington imbibes such framing and how far that relationship is from considerations of American withdrawal. This seven-year support package ensures an annual baseline of \$1.45 billion of US foreign aid, of which nearly one-third is earmarked as security assistance for the JAF. The 2021 US-Jordanian Defense Pact also cemented the kingdom as an irrevocable component of wider US war-making across the region, as it gave American forces visa-free entry rights to the country. These structured flows have also engendered shifts in how American officials diplomatically engage the Kingdom, with the US intelligence community and US Army essentially running distinct “diplomatic” relations with their partners in the Jordanian state. For example, the US Army's presence in Jordan has evolved to the point that on multiple occasions, the US Secretary of Defense has arrived at Jordanian bases without any Jordanian civil official present, giving the public impression that the US military owns the Jordanian bases. The most overt political paradox that emerges from these structural entanglements is that the Monarchy is careful to try and avoid any appearance of a lack of

sovereignty, yet at the same time it is desperate to keep the Americans close and avoid any talk of change.

Conclusion

The security-development problem is therefore a central facet of Amman's relationship with Washington. Recent Jordanian hand wringing about a possible American abandonment of the Kingdom are belied by the intense

American-Jordanian security coordination over the last year to support Israel's assault on Palestine. Jordan's primary security institutions have emerged from decades of American involvement to become politically powerful actors in Jordan and regionally. Still, the constant kindling of socio-economic unrest in the Kingdom punctuated by periodic crisis underlies a fragile politics where massive investment in "security" helps generate the very challenges to this order.

Endnotes

- ¹ Figures from World Bank's *World Development Indicators* dataset, with 2019 representing the latest verified figures.
- ² Department of Statistics, *Labor Force Survey 2022*.
- ³ *Jordan Times*, "Tourism Sector Contributed 53,589 Jobs in 2019," 18 January 2020.
- ⁴ World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
- ⁵ Central Bank of Jordan, *Annual Statistical Bulletin* (Amman: CBJ, serial); and General Budget Department, *Summary of General Budget* (Amman: GBD, serial).
- ⁶ For more on the GID's financing, see Pete Moore, "A Political-Economic History of Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate: Authoritarian State-Building and Fiscal Crisis," *Middle East Journal* 73 (2019): 242-262.
- ⁷ Shana Marshall, "Jordan's Military-Industrial Sector: Maintaining Institutional Prestige in the Era of Neoliberalism," in *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region*, eds. Elke Grawert and Zeinab Abul-Magd (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 119-134.
- ⁸ Benjamin Scheutze, "Simulating, marketing, and playing war: US-Jordanian military collaboration and the politics of commercial security," *Security Dialogue*, 48(5), pp. 431-450
- ⁹ King Abdallah began making statements and speeches about the need for "security reform" in 2020-21 that reflect this technocratic sentiment.
- ¹⁰ Data from United States Agency for International Development, *US Overseas Loans and Grants* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2023).
- ¹¹ Sean Yom and Gregory Gause, "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchs Hold On," *Journal of Democracy* (October 2012)
- ¹² It should be noted that this currency subvention is aimed at supporting the Monarchy's private sector allies. Therefore, there is more to Jordan's developmental dilemmas than just the military politics.
- ¹³ A frequent complaint of US trainers is the lack of equipment and logistical support in the JAF. The impression is that only the most high-profile systems (helicopters, aircraft, and some land systems) are actually serviced by the JAF leaving large parts of military support untended.
- ¹⁴ Most US officers interviewed for this research declined to offer an estimate on the CIA's assistance to Jordan. One former US military attaché to Amman did estimate it at about half or three-fourths of the official US aid to Jordan.
- ¹⁵ Defense 360, <https://defense360.csis.org/enduring-dilemma-oco-funding/>
- ¹⁶ Health, education, taxation, and local development are the most common projects..
- ¹⁷ Interviews with former US Army officers assigned to training in Jordan, February 2022; Interviews with US Army Central Command civilian official, Shaw AFB, South Carolina, June 2018; Interview with former US Defense Attaché to Jordan, May 2022; Interviews with retired JAF general level officers, Amman May 2018
- ¹⁸ See, Scheutze, "Simulating, marketing, and playing war"

US Primacy and the New Hegemony Studies

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On January 21st, 2025, Donald Trump signed an executive order that “temporarily” suspended all “U.S. foreign assistance programs for 90 days” in order to “determine” which “aligned with his policy goals.”¹ Although foreign aid comprises a tiny percentage of the annual U.S. budget, the freeze had major global consequences. It may, for example, result in the collapse of key sources of independent news media in a number of repressive and war-torn countries.² Some analysts estimated that the freeze could result in the deaths of tens, and possibly hundreds of thousands, of people who face starvation and lack crucial medical care. Even after the State Department issued a humanitarian waiver, disruptions and confusion plagued many lifesaving programs.³

The United States is far from the only international donor. China is also a major source of foreign assistance, and its total spending likely now exceeds that of the United States; the European Union, if one includes its member-states’ own programs, also spends more than the United States on international assistance.⁴ But the disruptions caused by Trump’s are far from the only indicator of the size and scale of the U.S. global footprint. The U.S. armed forces operate, in one way or another, in every region of the world. U.S. alliances, guarantees, and military actions profoundly shape global international security. It played a key role in creating and, at least until a few weeks ago, underwriting the most important institutions of global governance. The dollar dominates, by a wide margin, international monetary order. U.S. banks remain central to global financial flows. During the Great Recession of 2008-2009, it was the U.S. Federal Reserve that backstopped the teetering global economy.⁵

Nonetheless, most analysts and governments argue that the era of U.S. unipolarity is over. They do not necessarily agree on whether the emerging international system is

bipolar or multipolar—and they seldom explain why it matters one way or the other. We can argue over whether China and Russia qualify as “peer competitors” of the United States, but that distinction does not change the fact that both countries *have* eroded U.S. global dominance and, as of 2025, mounted successful political challenges to the United States and its allies.

Europe’s future remains uncertain. The second Trump administration might push the European Union (EU) to embrace strategic autonomy. In a decade it could become a major military power in its own right, or, perhaps helped along by U.S. and Russian meddling and the rise of its own right-wing populist forces, succumb to fracture and fragmentation. Then there are the perennially emerging great powers, including Brazil and India. Japan is a great power hiding in plain sight, but one currently so militarily intertwined with the United States that its mix of capabilities require fighting alongside American forces.⁶

The second Trump administration, for its part, appears intent on a program of “geopolitical suicide,” in which it attacks the very infrastructure—including U.S. alliances, international institutions, and U.S. centrality in the global financial system—that undergirds U.S. hegemony.⁷ Trump himself, for instance, seems unaware of the degree that, for example, his *ability* to threaten allies with financial and trade sanctions depends on their continued *willingness* to make themselves vulnerable to the United States.⁸ Key decisionmakers in the Trump administration apparently share his belief that American “power” is simply about having a large military and even a larger economy.

They, as Rebecca Solnit puts it, “fail to understand that we live in a world of intricate systems. Immigrants keep [American’s] food and construction industries and quite a bit of our medical systems going. The climate is not

something you can pretend doesn't matter and isn't changing. They imagine a simple world of static objects they can move around or dump.”⁹

Our baseline theories of international hegemony—the kind we outline in mainstream, introductory courses—are not stupid. The scholars who use them, by and large, understand that we live—and have for quite some time—in a world of “intricate systems.” But their theories of international politics also typically imagine a “simple world of static objects,” in which hegemony can be reduced to holding a preponderant “stock” of military primacy, which in turn derives, although in ways mediated by intervening variables of various kinds, from possessing a large economy. As I understand matters, the same understanding of international hegemony tends to animate policy discussions about the Middle East and other world regions.

We are talking, in essence, about the assumption of a realist “states-under-anarchy” model. In this world, the myriad social, military, and economic networks that link states, societies, organizations, and individuals barely merit an afterthought. Practices and performances make for good stories, and little else. Only “hard” or “material” power (sometimes economic, always military) truly matters. Other forms of capital are not, in the terms of Pierre Bourdieu, relevant when it comes to the “field” of international power politics.¹⁰ Social movements and non-state organizations barely register.

I would imagine that this model of the world is incomprehensible to scholars who work on the Middle East and North Africa. There, non-state violence-wielding organizations compete with the armies of states. Some of those states are less national-territorial than composite. Cross-cutting ethnic, religious, and ideological ties have profoundly shaped “international” politics since the Ottoman period. The trajectory of state formation is, as Gause and Ryan reminds us, impossible to grasp without reference to the practices of a succession of external great powers.

Yet, many continue to see the Middle East as the epitome of a realist system based on its frequent wars, domestic authoritarianism, limited institutionalization, and disregard for international law and global norms. This entails a failure to think in terms of counterfactuals: to ask how those politics would play out in a different international order. It also represents a category error: modern realist theories are attempts to explain *realpolitik* behavior. The presence of power politics, no matter how cutthroat, does not necessarily imply that we should reach for realist theory to explain it.¹¹

Indeed, the Realist model of hegemony, long dominant, is no longer the only game in town—not, one might say, hegemonic. Much work in hegemony studies remains focused, for understandable reasons, on the conditions that make great-power war more or less likely.¹² Graham Allison’s “Thucydides trap” is simply a popularized version of power-transition theory and the “theory of hegemonic war.”¹³ But research on international hegemony has moved well beyond the “states-under-anarchy” model, or at least heavily qualified it.¹⁴ We are, some claim, in the midst of a “third wave” of international hegemony studies, one marked by, first, greater theoretical pluralism and, second, much greater attention to the *politics* of hegemony and hegemonic orders.¹⁵

This essay lays out the key components of this third wave and suggests how it might lead both Middle East experts to rethink their approach to US primacy.

The (New) New Hegemony Studies

Nothing drives the development of hegemonic-order theory more than anxiety about hegemonic decline. The multiple economic crises of the 1970s, including the collapse of the original Bretton Woods System, provide the backdrop for hegemonic-stability theory. Ikenberry’s *After Victory* became the academic anchor for those who thought that George W. Bush’s doctrine of preemption was a mortal threat to American leadership.¹⁶ The “third wave” of hegemony studies is, in the main, a creature of the

rise of China. But it also has developed in a *very* different disciplinary context than prior waves.

First, Marxist international-relations theory, especially in the United States, almost totally collapsed along with the Soviet Union. Realism occupies a precarious position in the discipline, while constructivism has splintered into distinct research programs. More broadly, the “paradigm wars” have mostly wound down, and few IR scholars still use them to organize their books and articles. This has enabled a great deal of eclecticism in third-wave hegemony studies, with more cross-fertilization of ideas and a greater emphasis on dialogue.

Second, the rise of the “new hierarchy studies” served as an umbrella for a wide range of work *explicitly* on vertical stratification in international relations. Some rejected the “states-under-anarchy” framework and argued that international politics is a domain of complex authority relations—both formal and informal. Others developed richer understandings of the social dynamics of hierarchies—including with respect to norms, status competition, and the balance of influence between super- and subordinate actors.¹⁷

Third, the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath—especially the invasion and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq—produced an explosion of interest in empires and imperialism. The debate about “American Empire” was not always productive, but it did force international-relations scholars (eventually) to approach the conceptual relationship between “hegemony,” “informal empire,” and “empire” with a lot more analytical rigor than we previously had. Predictably, no consensus developed. But the debate pushed forward the “new hierarchy studies.” It also fed directly into “third wave” hegemony studies.

These three threads help explain why contemporary hegemonic-order theories are particularly interested in “how hegemonic orders operate in practice; how they produce opportunities and constraints for actors in world politics; the dynamics of power-political competition within and over order; and the mutually

interdependent relationship between preeminent powers and the orders they create, sustain, and seek to alter.”¹⁸ In this effort, scholars draw on a wide range of ways to theorize hegemony and international order. These include quantitative and qualitative network analysis, practice and field theory, theories of firm integration, organizational sociology, and discourse analysis and theories of identity.¹⁹

Contemporary hegemonic-order theories take much more seriously the difference between, on the one hand, hegemonic powers and, on the other hand, the international orders that they shape.²⁰ Even after system-wide wars, hegemons “cannot completely restructure international order.” The United States, Great Britain, Bourbon France, the Ming, the Qing, and the Umayyad Caliphate all emerged “in pre-existing” orders that profoundly shaped their ordering practices. Moreover, hegemonic powers “rarely, if ever, enjoy a sufficient preponderance” of power to completely rewrite the texture of international politics.²¹

Traditional hegemonic-order theories had trouble accommodating the possibility that hegemonic powers themselves might (at least outside of postwar settlements) seek to revise international order. Instead, they tended to treat *opposition* to a hegemonic power as *per se* revisionist. But the United States, for example, has arguably been the most revisionist state of the twenty-first century—even before Trump 2.0. The Global War on Terror saw the United States rewrite “the rules” of international politics, including through the doctrine of “preemption” that the Bush administration used to justify its 2003 invasion of Iraq. It also made international order significantly more illiberal by, among other things, creating a precedent for denying basic rights to anyone labelled a “terrorist.”²²

Contemporary hegemonic-order theories emphasize that international orders supply both means and mediums for influence, that they create and condition power politics. We saw this, at least to a limited degree, in the Gaza conflict. Those seeking to protect Palestinian noncombatants have successfully leveraged liberal institutions and norms to increase the political costs of

Israeli policy, as well as U.S. support for Israel. Observers correctly argue that “liberal order” has failed to stop Israel’s targeting practices, its abuse of prisoners, or the pogroms launched by far-right religious settlers on the West Bank. But we also need to ask ourselves how the conflict would look, first, in absence of contemporary international humanitarian law and, second, with a great-power patron that faced *no* political costs from mass violence against noncombatants.

Standard definitions of “international order” stress rules, norms, and institutions of global governance. This reflects of a) the ways that structural functionalism—in which norms explain how social order persists—continues to shape our conceptions of order, b) the influence of English School theory in accounts of international order, and c) the emphasis that first-generation constructivists often placed on sociological institutionalism. At the same time, most scholars of international order agree that “order” is a shorthand for relative stabilities in patterns of interaction—a textbook definition of social structure.²³

There is no consensus either with respect to how to define international order or where, if at all, to draw the line between “international structure” and “international order.” Many of the theoretical traditions represented in hegemony studies embrace distinctive ways of conceptualizing structure, including both in terms of “social networks” or “social fields.” But what they share is a tendency to *disaggregate* international order—hegemonic or otherwise. This is not just a matter of distinguishing between regional orders and global orders. It often involves exploring variation in international order across functional domains, in different status groups (such as, great powers, middle powers, and weaker states), and among types of actors.²⁴

In *Exit from Hegemony*, Alex Cooley and I adopted a crude heuristic for dealing with the multiple dimensions of order. We distinguish between the “architecture” and “infrastructure” of international order. We use the former to refer to “design principles” (even if emergent and unplanned) such as rules and norms. We describe

“infrastructure” as the practices, interactions, and relations that comprise the “stuff” of international order. In the case of U.S. hegemony, these range from joint military exercises to routine communication between midlevel officials in ministries of finance, to systems of financial flows.

One of the leitmotifs that runs through the book is that, like the Trump administration, we ignore “infrastructure” at our peril. For one thing, U.S. hegemony is built on an extensive network of ongoing diplomatic and military interactions. For another, much of “the action” in contemporary international order involves the creation of diplomatic, economic, and military ties that exclude the United States, especially by China. In our view, this is where most of the “action” is when it comes to the fate of international orders; by the time we get to explicit renegotiations of architecture, the infrastructure is usually already changed.

In that book, as well as a more recent edited volume, we emphasize that orders are also created and maintained by the provision of various goods: economic, security, cultural, and so forth.²⁵ Hegemonic-stability theory, for example, has long argued that hegemons provide public goods, supposedly including an open trading system. David Lake correctly notes that a lot of the goods provided by great powers are “private” rather than public; many are “club” goods.²⁶ Carla Norrlof emphasizes that the U.S. has leveraged those goods, including through threats of exclusion, in order to create a more favorable order for itself—including ensuring that the dollar would remain the global reserve currency after the collapse of the Bretton Woods system.²⁷ What goods great powers provide, under what terms, to whom, and in what ways are not just a way of shaping order—they are a great deal of what we call order.²⁸

A great deal of work on contemporary “order contestation” (the idea that orders are always negotiated and contested is pretty fundamental to third-wave hegemony studies) focuses on how power transitions change the opportunities and constraints for lower-tier powers. A big part of this is the rise of alternative providers of goods—development

aid, security guarantees, and the like. These generate exit options for states that, heretofore, were dependent on the incumbent hegemon. This, in turn, increases their bargaining leverage and gives them the ability to “hedge” by diversifying their portfolio. Great power competition, all things being equal, means paying more to get less.²⁹

But competitive international environments can also create incentives for the formation of informal and formal empire. One way that a great power can ensure control over its client is to de facto or de jure strip it of its capacity for autonomous foreign policy.³⁰ So third-wave hegemony studies emphasize contestation and negotiation over order. It takes a more expansive view of order and ordering processes (in fact, I have argued that we should be talking about “ordering” rather than “order”). It also, as I already noted, focuses on how the “stuff” of international order structures the opportunities and constraints faced by states—including hegemonic powers.

The Israel-Hamas war was itself embedded in a regional “conflict complex” that involves a number of different fault lines, most notably the divide between the now much-weakened “Axis of Resistance” and its opponents. These conflicts have a lot of different stakes, but one of them is most definitely regional (and even global) order. Meanwhile, the security order that Washington played a major role in shaping provides the United States with multiple vectors and instruments of influence. But it also constrains U.S. policy, as the Obama administration learned on multiple occasions (from the KSA’s crackdown in Bahrain to the complications created by its pursuit of the JCPOA).³¹

The role of Hamas and Hezbollah in the struggle over order in the Middle East harkens back to something that I noted earlier: traditional hegemonic-order theories completely ignore transnational and substate actors, even though both can play crucial roles in the politics of international order. This is not just a matter of “nuance.” Once we start taking nonstate actors seriously, it turns out that we have misunderstood classic cases of hegemony.

For example, Habsburg Spain is perhaps *the* archetypal case of hegemonic overextension: of a preponderant power getting pulled into peripheral conflicts that it cannot afford to fight. But one of the chief causes of their “overextension” was not foreign wars per se but having to deal with uprising and rebellions. The most important of these, the Dutch Revolt, would have failed—and might not have happened at all—in the absence of the organizational infrastructure created by the Reformed Church and without substantial support from protestants outside of the Netherlands. In modern parlance, we are talking about “transnational religious networks.”³² Any similarities with the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq are completely coincidental.

Finally, the older literature on hegemonic orders almost completely ignores anticolonial movements, even though they drove arguably the single most important change in international order of the last century. More broadly, revisionist states don’t just fall from coconut trees. They often result when counter-order (revisionist) *political movements* take control of a government. Fascism and communism, the two great revisionist forces of the interwar period, began life as political movements with important transnational dimensions.

The Current Power Transition

Our tendency to focus on “unipolarity” occludes the degree that hegemony in the 1990s was essentially exercised by a great-power cartel, made up largely of members of the G7. By the later 1990s, the “liberal international order” rested on two large federations—the United States and the European Union—and their outsized economic power. Even if the U.S. was really the “indispensable nation,” that was only the case because practically every other great power in the world was deeply embedded in the American security system, anchored by NATO and the U.S.-Japan bilateral alliance. Most of those great powers could have formed the backbone of a counterbalancing coalition. Instead, they *chose* to remain part of an informal confederation led by the United States.³³

What they also did was form a more or less united front on the provision of international goods, especially development assistance. While their regulatory regimes, internationalized via their market power, differed in many ways, the U.S. and its allies generally committed themselves to fostering an open international economy. In consequence, the “liberal international order” was, more or less, the only game in town. Governments looking for economic goods, credible security guarantees, or even seeking to improve their international standing had little choice but to accept “western” conditions and expectations. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the “triumph” of market democracy also, for a time, lent substantial prestige to the “liberal international order.”

None of this meant that the G7 cartel always got what it wanted. States with highly specific assets could still escape much of this pressure. This was true of some of the most important players in the Middle East, who benefited from some combination of large petroleum reserves and, for example, U.S. national security priorities. Oil wealth also positioned states in the region—namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and, with some caveats, Iran—among the few sources of alternative international patronage. And while the Gulf States sometimes provided assistance to forces hostile to the United States—and supported rival sides in conflicts—they also chose to remain within the U.S. alliance system rather than to balance against it.

The ‘western’ patronage quasi-monopoly was never going to last. The idea, as noted above, was to shape rising powers such that they would eventually become sources of liberal ordering in their own right. Instead, many of them developed strategies and tactics for resisting liberalizing forces; they learned how to turn digital communications technologies to their advantage. They now use these strategies to undermine western democracies. Other authoritarian regimes and aspiring autocrats borrow — or outright purchase — their playbook. And, of course, firms in the United States, Europe, Israel, and elsewhere are more than happy to grab a share of the domestic repression market.³⁴

The overwhelming consensus in Washington policy circles is that “enlargement” was on balance a failure. Over the last fifteen years, China has become more, not less, authoritarian. Russia is no longer a democracy, and it seeks to actively undermine liberal democracy overseas. The G7’s share of global GDP has fallen dramatically, while China—and to a lesser extent Russia—has broken the ‘western’ patronage monopoly. Small powers can now diversify their ‘international goods’ portfolios, play different patrons against one another, or even exit from ‘western order’ altogether. Meanwhile, many countries, including the United States, have birthed counter-order movements. Many commentators believe that the rise of reactionary populism is a direct response to the ‘excesses’ of liberal order, especially to the “neoliberal” variety that became dominant in the 1990s. Others stress the role of status insecurity rooted in, or at least exacerbated by, relative decline. Regardless, a counter-order movement now controls the government of the incumbent hegemon.³⁵

The Gaza conflict, which has destabilized, and killed tens of thousands in the Levant, occurred in a context of a broader crisis of liberal international order (which is mirrored by a crisis of democracy within Israel and in the United States). It has possibly accelerated that crisis: to the extent that it affected the outcome of the 2024 U.S. election, appears to have given Netanyahu a new lease on life, resulted in a crippling blow to Palestinian self-determination, and convinced many of the hollowness of liberal order. There might be a bitter irony in that. The Oslo Accords represented the apex of the U.S. post-Cold War liberal project in the United States (Iraq was a very different kind of “liberal” project). The Biden administration hoped to resurrect the accords, just as it hoped to restore liberal order. Instead, it midwived the likely end of both.

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Endnotes

¹ Lee 2025

² Scott 2025

³ Shalal 2025

⁴ see Pramanik and Seim 2023; Regilme and Hodzi 2021; "International Development Aid - European Commission," n.d.

⁵ Cooley and Nexon 2020; Clark 2009; Farrell and Newman 2019b; Gibbons 2016; Ikenberry 2011; 2004; Miller 2016; Norrlof 2010; Norrlof et al. 2020; Nye 2019; Oatley et al. 2013; Oatley 2015; Rapp-Hooper 2020; Winecoff 2020

⁶ for various perspectives, see Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman 2023; Alcaro 2018; Cooley and Nexon 2020; Flockhart 2016; Herolf 2011; Posen 2009

⁷ Beauchamp 2018

⁸ Farrell and Newman 2019b; 2019a; Cooley and Nexon 2025

⁹ Solnit 2025

¹⁰ see Bourdieu 1986; see also Adler-Nissen 2012

¹¹ Goddard and Nexon 2016; Goddard, MacDonald, and Nexon 2019

¹² Ward 2017

¹³ Allison 2017

¹⁴ Astute readers will already be understandably upset with my lack of a discussion of neo-Gramscian and other Marxist-inflected accounts of hegemony. This is just a matter of space. For brief discussions, see Ikenberry and Nexon 2019

¹⁵ see Ikenberry and Nexon 2019.

¹⁶ Ikenberry 2001

¹⁷ Mattern and Zarakol 2016

- ¹⁸ Ikenberry and Nexon 2019, 397–98; see, for example, Bettiza and Lewis 2020; Chan et al. 2021; Dezalay and Garth 2010; Daßler, Kruck, and Zangl 2019; Drezner 2019; Goh 2013; Heimann et al. 2024; Kruck and Zangl 2019; Norrlof 2018
- ¹⁹ Ikenberry and Nexon 2019, 397–98; for social fields, see Banks 2019; Go 2008; McCourt 2021; Oskanian 2023; for networks, see Goddard 2018; Izumikawa 2020; MacDonald 2014; for theories of firm integration, see Cooley 2005; for discourse and identity see Lake 1999; Hopf 2013; 2013; Murray 2018; Ward 2017 see Cooley 2005; for discourse and identity see Lake 1999; Hopf 2013; 2013; Murray 2018; Ward 2017
- ²⁰ see Goddard 2008; 2018; Mukherjee 2019.
- ²¹ Nexon and Neumann 2018, 662.
- ²² Cooley, Nexon, and Ward 2019; Cooley and Nexon 2021; 2025; Chan et al. 2021.
- ²³ see Lascurettes and Poznansky 2021; see also Goddard 2018; Cooley and Nexon 2020; Tang 2016.
- ²⁴ see Barder 2015; J. Colgan 2021; J. D. Colgan and Miller 2019; Jones 2008; Lascurettes and Poznansky 2021; Towns 2009
- ²⁵ Andersen, Cooley, and Nexon 2021
- ²⁶ Lake 2009
- ²⁷ Norrlof 2010; see also Norrlof et al. 2020; Norrlof 2014
- ²⁸ Cooley, Nexon, and Ward 2019
- ²⁹ see Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2016; Dunning 2004; Woods 2008
- ³⁰ Lake 1996; MacDonald 2009a; 2009b
- ³¹ Indeed, if I understand correctly, Israel is facing serious munitions shortages. Those shortages will continue as long it continues operations in Gaza. But those shortages also threaten regional deterrence, and thus put pressure on the Biden administration to continue supplying weaponry.
- ³² Nexon 2009
- ³³ compare Ikenberry 2001; 2011
- ³⁴ see, for example, Cooley 2019; 2015; Cooley and Nexon 2021; Farrell and Newman 2021
- ³⁵ see Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021.

“Forever War for Profit: The United States, Israel/Palestine, and the Global Corporate Security Economy”

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Introduction: Private Military Contracting and the War on Gaza

That the business of war is costly for civilians, but profitable for weapons manufacturers, is an uncomfortable yet undeniable truism. As CNN Business bloodlessly reported barely two weeks into Israel’s ongoing military campaign against Hamas: “When war breaks out, defense companies tend to make money. That means aerospace and defense stocks tend to rise during geopolitical unrest. In the immediate aftermath of the Israel-Hamas War, shares of military contractors spiked” by about seven percent “as both institutional and retail investors bought in.”¹ Since October 2023, various mainstream news outlets, U.S. military and foreign affairs publications, research, and non-governmental organizations have drawn public attention—by multiple means to multiple ends— to the boom, so to speak, in financing the production of missiles, bombs, and other military equipment for Israel. Student protestors, antiwar and anti-occupation activists, and certain journalists have especially worked to identify defense contractors as key players and beneficiaries in the violence. As Spencer Ackerman pointedly put it in July 2024, “Just because a war cannot be won does not mean that it lacks for winners... Those winners are in the boardrooms of [defense] companies.”²

While neither quite new nor fully mainstream in political or academic discussions on Israel/Palestine or U.S. foreign policy, the critical discourse recently generated by organizers, researchers, and public-facing writers has brought an analytically and intellectually vital spotlight to the political economy of war.³ This essay seeks to build upon this emergent body of knowledge by taking a long historical view of how corporate power—specifically, private military contractors (PMCs)— became indispensable to sustaining U.S. state, military, and

global power after World War II, but especially in the wake of September 11th. Rather than focusing on armed private security contractors or weapons manufacturers, I define PMCs as any for-profit entity that relies in full or significant part on public funding in order to supplement U.S. military efforts. This allows for a broader, institutional-level view of how PMCs operate not only within a global market for security, but also as state actors in their own right— situated at the hinges of the political and economic, public and private, domestic and transnational spheres.

Though this story takes a temporally and geographically circuitous route out of current events in Gaza, the broader historical processes by which PMCs have established themselves as lynchpins within the U.S. national security apparatus provide deep systemic and substantive context as to *why* and *how* “forever wars”— American as well as Israeli— remain so powerfully profitable despite their profound public unpopularity.

One critical factor that my analysis will foreground is that of rapidly evolving military technology. As tools of war have grown more sophisticated since the Second World War, the U.S. government has subsequently grown more dependent on its relationship with what used to be called “industry,” in order to maintain American military edge. Overlapping with that domestic transformation in military-industrial relations was the heightened regional urgency and centrality of the Middle East for global U.S. foreign policy since the 1970s. As the United States strengthened its material security ties to Israel, and accordingly renewed its material security partnerships with other Middle Eastern powerbrokers, the resulting demand for hardware, software, and consulting expertise made the corporate producers of these new tools of war key diplomatic facilitators. They sustained government alliances, end-ran chronic labor shortages, and built

up U.S. capacity for what amounted to indirect state governance across the Middle East, but in Israel/Palestine in particular.

Yet, while myriad American and Israeli actors have richly profited from these arrangements, I argue that the very profitability that lubricates the entire global economy of militarism originates, ultimately, in U.S. public tax dollars. Tracing the history of private military contracting in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reveals the irreducibly *co-constitutive* nature of corporate and governmental power: corporate power is backstopped by U.S. public dollars, U.S. state power is underwritten by corporate power, and their mutual material benefit invests the U.S. and its allies, quite literally, in “forever war” as a way of life. The end-result of this commodification of security, and the securitization of everyday life, *is* in fact the horror still unfolding now in Gaza. By doing the work of state actors using state funds but generating only private profit, skirting civil-institutional scrutiny in the form of regulation and thus avoiding any meaningful responsibility for their outcomes of their policies, PMCs transform state power in the United States, Israel, and Palestine to structurally incentivize impunity.

Historicizing Private Military Contracting in the United States

Private military contracting, in its current scale and form as a massive war-funding mechanism, was neither a historical novelty nor inevitable. The U.S. mobilization for World War II involved mobilizing businessmen as well as scientists, industrial labor, and the traditional military corps; but the defense industry began to take on higher-profile political and economic importance *after* the hot war, in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁴

With the introduction of a new generation of weapons technology during World War II— from guided missiles and radar all the way up to the nuclear bomb— U.S. military and government officials broadly believed that conventional weapons in conventional quantities were no longer enough to assure victory. The wars of the future

would require increasingly sophisticated arsenals in order to better leverage technology against real or perceived capability gaps between the United States and its enemies. By definition, then, the successful exercise of state power would require interdependent relationships with the non-state entities capable of executing its political ambitions.

Indeed, already by the late 1960s, the Vietnam War exhibited a more expansive transnational U.S. political economy of militarism that dovetailed with more expansive U.S. foreign policy goals. In order to wage war on communist ideology, rather than traditional state-military targets, the U.S. military conducted a counterinsurgency campaign for “hearts and minds” in Vietnam— a project that required the wholesale creation of civilian infrastructure, in addition to surveillance, policing, and jungle warfare.⁵ Not only did established U.S. defense corporations develop upgraded chemical and biological weapons to use against civilians, including napalm and anti-personnel bombs; American state-building programs in South Vietnam required a diversified further set of contractors that offered more than hardware. For example, Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR)— which would later gain notoriety during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars— helped to construct ports, bases, roads, and airfields.⁶ The labor force that assisted American contractors was itself diverse and transnational, imbricated in an evolving militarized regional economy in Southeast Asia.⁷

Then as now, anti-war activists in the United States noted these developments in real time: the rhetorical language of “war profiteers” and civilian publics as “laboratories” echoes across decades and continents, from Vietnam in the 1970s to Palestine in the 2010s and 2020s.⁸ As one example, the National Action/Research on the Military-Industrial Complex (NARMIC), an offshoot of the Quaker organization the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), published a widely-circulated activist handbook in January 1970 called “Weapons for Counterinsurgency,” in which they employed “the art of publishing truth as a mode of action” to “assist and encourage local action/research groups to resist the power of militarism and defense industries over their social, economic and cultural

development.”⁹ Providing an illustrated survey of U.S. weapons and tactics in Vietnam, as well as a bibliography for further research, “Weapons for Counterinsurgency” specifically underlined the role of PMCs in enabling violence against racialized civilians for financial benefit. “In addition to being a laboratory,” NARMIC wrote, “Vietnam has become the dumping ground for new weapons... Southeast Asia provided the arms manufacturers— the war profiteers— with a ready and expanding market.”¹⁰

The literature on PMCs largely historicizes privatization through the “neoliberal turn” of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, as historian Mark R. Wilson argues, the “oft-discussed rise of deregulation and privatization... was preceded, and then accompanied, by an equally significant shift in the military-industrial field” from the 1940s through the 1960s.¹¹ As corporations in aerospace engineering, weapons development, construction, and transportation logistics together produced a diversifying market of products and expertise, so too did a heterogenous “Cold War coalition” across the political spectrum rise to secure their own personal and professional gain, including greater access to the halls of power.¹² Federal defense spending via military contracts across economic sectors undergirded the growth of the entire national U.S. economy throughout the Cold War.¹³

I narrate these broad domestic U.S. economic shifts because they intersected and indeed converged with global macroeconomic crises of energy and capital to tremendous consequence in the early 1970s— crises for which the Middle East functioned as a seismic epicenter. No shortage of studies exists to explicate the profusion of political-economic causes and implications; but the perspective of Israeli political scientists Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler is especially illuminating. “Middle East conflicts and energy crises aggravated the processes of stagflation and monetary instability around the world [and] intensified the global arms race,” they write. “Yet not everyone took a hit.” What Nitzan and Bichler term the “Weapon-dollar-Petro-dollar Coalition”— multinational oil companies, defense contractors, infrastructure companies, and financial institutions including banks— experienced,

not devastation, but “a massive differential accumulation bonanza,” in which “the very distinction between ‘state’ and ‘capital,’ ‘government policy’ and ‘private action,’ ‘international relations’ and ‘global business,’ is difficult and often impossible to pin down.”¹⁴

On the one hand, the arms trade— largely used as a foreign policy instrument by national governments— became privatized, turning into a “counter-cyclical, life-support mechanism for the leading arms contractors.” Meanwhile, the oil industry— largely a haven for private commercial interests— became “subject to increasing political control,” as oil-producing countries nationalized oil reserves and industrialized countries “moved to regulate the distribution, taxation and price of petroleum products.” These tandem, line-blurring processes allowed the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to politicize their oil in order to pay for new weapons, further raising oil prices and their own revenues in turn; while the United States in particular was able to leverage intensified regional conflict to boost arms exports and their attendant profits.¹⁵

Given the tide-turning U.S. involvement during the 1973 War, Israel occupied a central position at the heart of these regional cross-currents— in a physical *and* political-economic sense, with its 1967 capture of the West Bank, Gaza, Golan Heights, and Sinai. By 1980, when the American and Israeli governments officially signed a Memorandum of Understanding cementing their mutually lucrative security partnership, the enormous guaranteed influx of U.S. defense dollars would permanently alter the political economy of Israel— specifically the course of its occupation of Palestine.

Corporate State-Building in Israel

Though ostensibly a state-to-state relationship involving a complex array of institutional actors that include local police forces, universities, and non-governmental organization, the logistics of the U.S.-Israel relationship are uniquely contingent upon corporate PMCs to facilitate and execute. “Aid” as a political and conceptual designation

fails to adequately capture the financial and practical extent of PMCs' involvement in the Israeli economy in general, and the occupation of Palestine in particular. "State-building," I posit, is a more appropriate framework by which to articulate the outcome of U.S. corporate-military involvement in Israel over five decades.

The ubiquitous presence of PMCs in this space is neither a nefarious conspiracy nor an incidental sideshow. Though not often stated as such, defense contractors and contracting have been implicitly baked into the logic of American policy in the Middle East since the 1973 War. U.S. military aid to Israel has been designed to maintain Israel's "qualitative military edge" (QME) over other regional militaries. As the Congressional Research Service puts it, "The rationale for QME is that Israel must rely on better equipment and training to compensate for being much smaller in land area and population than most of its potential adversaries."¹⁶ But this foundational underlying principle *by definition* requires that Israel requires access to American PMCs. Congress disburses earmarked public U.S. funds through the relevant financial mechanisms, which include grants, vouchers, and facilitated purchasing and financing; yet, it is the companies themselves who ultimately deliver the primary basis of U.S. military aid. And it is therefore the companies who are able to metabolize billions of public dollars into undisclosed private profit.

As Nitzan and Bichler point out: "Unlike economic assistance, military aid couldn't be pocketed by domestic groups, at least not directly... [The money] was transferred straight from the bank account of the U.S. government to the bank accounts of U.S. military contractors, who then shipped their hardware to Israel." Yet, this arrangement "did not leave the Israeli groups empty-handed." The Israeli army "retained the right to pick and choose its American weapons," so "each U.S. supplier had to hire its own local retainers to plead its case and hopefully share the spoils. Over the years, many of Israel's retired IDF generals and chiefs-of-staff, big businessmen and leading politicians... have been integrated as middlemen into this mechanism... While on the surface the inflow of capital looked largely

a matter of philanthropy, humanitarian aid or foreign policy, under the surface it helped create and sustain a complicated international infrastructure of private accumulation."¹⁷

The corporate nature of U.S. military investment in Israel sets the conditions for the broader Israeli economy. As Shir Hever explains, Israel began to develop its own "military-industrial complex" after 1967, with the military industry growing 143% by 1972 alone. "More importantly," Hever elaborates, "[Israel's defense economy] grew beyond its role as a government-protected and regulated industry designed mainly to outfit the Israeli military, and became an economic sector in which private investors could invest." Within Israel, the industry still tends to be dominated by government-owned companies, but Hever points to the Oslo period as one in which the changing costs of occupation, combined with institutional pressure on Israeli economic institutions to imitate U.S. policies, galvanized the privatization of Israeli security.¹⁸ Given that the primary objective of Israeli security policy since 1967 has been to maintain control of the West Bank and Gaza, PMCs in both the U.S. and Israel have an active stake in Israel's untenable status quo.

The Commodification of Security

Privatization— the process by which roles of governance traditionally held by civil institutions are transferred to entities that operate for profit— lays bare the "non-homogenous interests of various elements within the state and of various private agents."¹⁹ Most strikingly in the case of PMCs in the United States and Israel/Palestine, commodification makes corporate and state power simultaneously co-constitutive *and* mutually self-destructive.

Israel exemplifies the dialectical ambivalence of "domestic" and "transnational" capital flows: as a settler state sustained through the twentieth century by large investments from donors and foreign governments, it absorbed the external capital into a synthesized national economy, only for this domestic capital to transcend the state in the 1970s

and 1980s, re-integrating it into the global economy in new form.²⁰ By the 1990s, corporate interaction with the transnational market for security no longer required as much state mediation through intergovernmental aid or loans; rather, private capital could flow directly between Israeli security companies and other security companies as well as foreign governments.²¹ But Palestine— as defined both through the state intended to encompass the West Bank and Gaza, and through the Palestinian nation living in diaspora across Israel/Palestine— exemplifies the devastating human repercussions of corporatized state power.

As Hever schematizes it: “Although at no point did the Israeli government officially withdraw from its obligation to protect the public, it allowed security to become commodified, *a service which can be bought* and therefore which is not available to everyone in the same quantities [emphasis mine].”²² Commodifying all aspects of social and political life through the lens of security— as opposed to funding a national military defense against a credible, immediate military threat— undermines and unmakes the civil-democratic nature of governing institutions by allowing both governments and militaries to abdicate responsibility, either for their policies or the publics that are vulnerable to them. The proprietary nature of PMCs, when intersected with the top-secret national-defense prerogatives, discourage informational transparency: accurate figures on U.S. and Israeli defense sales, particularly in the cybersecurity market, are impossible to pinpoint.²³ Such cloaks of secrecy only make it easier to conduct raids, displacements, and extralegal violence against Palestinian civilians without scrutiny— during wartime and beyond.

As early as 1987, scholars like Sara Roy warned that Israel’s political-economic stranglehold on Gaza “[exceeded] traditional parameters of dependency” and economic exploitation. Roy proposed a framework of “de-development,” a process which “weakens the ability of an economy to grow and expand by preventing it from accessing and utilizing critical inputs needed to promote internal growth beyond a specific structural level.”²⁴ By the time of this writing in October 2024, a year into Israel’s assaults on Gaza, the United Nations has found “reasonable grounds” to term the war a genocide— yet supplemental U.S. military funding to Israel already exceeds \$6.5 billion, with no signs of abatement despite consistent worldwide protests.²⁵ This level of material support, I argue, functionally makes the U.S. a co-equal partner with correspondingly co-equal responsibility for Gaza’s fate. And with unchecked famine and disease ravaging a captive population largely comprised of children, whatever is left of Gaza when the bombs finally quiet will more closely resemble Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of bare life. This is the human endgame resulting from two major industrialized economies investing, quite literally, in the business of security— in states of “forever war.”

Scholar Eyal Weizman has observed that “Israeli militarism has always sought military solutions to political problems.”²⁶ However, as Sara Roy wrote in December 2023, Israel has now “created a humanitarian problem to manage a political problem... [transforming] ordinary life into war by other means, using the threat of catastrophe as a form of governance and suffering as an instrument of control.”²⁷ With Gaza’s profoundly bleak present and future prospects, it is essential to parse the distinct role of corporate actors in making so extreme a military campaign logistically, if not morally, possible.

Endnotes

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- ² Spencer Ackerman, "These Corporations Are the True 'Winners' of the War on Gaza," *The Nation*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/economy/gaza-war-profiteers-corporations/>.
- ³ See, for example: American Friends Service Committee, "Companies Profiting from the Gaza Genocide," May 28, 2024, <https://afsc.org/gaza-genocide-companies>.
- ⁴ For one contemporary historicization of this phenomenon, see: Fred J. Cook, "Juggernaut: The Warfare State," *The Nation*, October 28, 1961, 277-337.
- ⁵ For more on counterinsurgency and its blurred civil-military scope, see: Hannah Gurman, *Hearts and Minds: A People's History of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013); David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).
- ⁶ James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- ⁷ Patrick Chung "From Korea to Vietnam: Local Labor, Multinational Capital, and the Evolution of US Military Logistics, 1950-97," *Radical History Review* 133 (2019): 31-55.
- ⁸ Re: Palestine as laboratory, see: Antony Loewenstein, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World* (London: Verso, 2023).
- ⁹ National Action/Research on the Military-Industrial Complex, "Weapons for Counterinsurgency," January 15, 1970, https://afsc.org/sites/default/files/documents/1970_Weapons%20for%20Counterinsurgency%20-%20NARMIC.pdf.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, 15.
- ¹¹ Mark R. Wilson, *Destructive Creation: American Business and the Winning of World War II* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 6. See also: Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- ¹² Michael Brenes, *For Might and Right: Cold War Defense Spending and the Remaking of American Democracy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020).
- ¹³ Scott Campbell, Peter Gavin Hall, Sabrina Deitrick, and Ann R. Markusen, *The Rise of the Gunbelt: The Military Remapping of Industrial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- ¹⁴ Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *The Global Political Economy of Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 25-26.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, 26.
- ¹⁶ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, by Jeremy M. Sharp, RL33222 (2023), 5.
- ¹⁷ Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *The Global Political Economy of Israel*, 28.
- ¹⁸ Shir Hever, *The Privatization of Israeli Security* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 3, 33, 171.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, 5.
- ²⁰ Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *The Global Political Economy of Israel*, 14.
- ²¹ *ibid.*, 29.
- ²² Shir Hever, *The Privatization of Israeli Security*, 118.
- ²³ Antony Loewenstein, *The Palestine Laboratory*, 36.
- ²⁴ Sara Roy, "The Gaza Strip: A Case of Economic De-Development," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1987), 56.
- ²⁵ "Rights Expert Finds 'Reasonable Grounds' Genocide Is Being Committed in Gaza," *United Nations News*, March 26, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147976>; Sharon Zhang, "Report: US Has Sent Israel \$6.5 Billion in Military Assistance Since October," *TruthOut*, June 27, 2024, <https://truthout.org/articles/report-us-has-sent-israel-6-5-billion-in-military-assistance-since-october/>.
- ²⁶ Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), 253.
- ²⁷ Sara Roy, "The Long War on Gaza," *The New York Review*, December 19, 2023.

Regional Alliances in the Middle East from the Arab Spring to the Gaza War

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Regional alliances within the Middle East often emerge due to regime conceptions of interest and identity, yet in practice many remain more aspirational than effective. This essay examines intra-regional alliance politics in the Middle East, from the Arab uprisings to the Gaza war, as crises have shaken the regional system, and especially its shifting patterns of alliances and alignments. While alliances are a very traditional concept in international relations theory, their actual forms in the Middle East are anything but traditional, and hence require a more nuanced look, especially as some regional alliances include not only states but also non-state actors (Darwich 2021, Ryan 2020a). This is also true of other core concepts in international relations in the Middle East and elsewhere, including states, regimes, alliances, and perhaps most importantly, the nature of security itself – in order to better understand international relations in the region (Bilgin 2004, Bilgin 2015). U.S. foreign policy will struggle to achieve its goals if it fails to understand the drivers of the alliance choices of regional states, and how they typically respond to threats and incentives.

As I have argued elsewhere, ruling regimes in the Middle East tend to use alliances not just in the traditional sense – as external defense pacts – but even more often for ensuring domestic regime security (Ryan 2009, 2015, 2020a). Alliances might therefore best be seen as transnational support coalitions between ruling regimes, each helping to prop the other up, sometimes against external challengers, sometimes against their own populations. Alliances can therefore play traditional roles – as military defense pacts against external threats – but they can also be used to secure ideational support (Gause 2003, Rubin 2014, Darwich 2019) or the financial largesse to maintain the regime (Brand 1994) and to provide essential pay-offs to the ruling coalition, securing the regime against domestic threats (Ryan 2009).

The politics of intra-regional alliances therefore includes struggles over competing ideational as well as material approaches to domestic and regional order. As Del Sarto, Malmwig, and Soler i Lecha have argued, “the obsession of regimes with remaining in power has further blurred the boundary between the domestic and the regional, as perceived threats to regime survival are balanced by often erratic foreign policies, interventions and ever-shifting alliances” (Del Sarto, Malmwig, and Soler i Lecha, 2019: 3). There is also a structural component. The latest moments of regional crisis – the 2011 Arab uprisings and the 2023 Gaza war – took place in a broader international relations background of de facto regional and global multipolarity, and a widespread perception of U.S. decline in regional politics. The Middle East thus appeared to be increasingly multipolar at more than one level: in terms of multiple foreign powers being actively involved in Middle East international relations, and also in terms of multiple regional powers playing more assertive roles than usual.

Intra-Regional Alliances from the Arab Spring to the Gaza War

When the 2023-24 Gaza war began, the region featured a series of loose and shifting alliances and alignments, but nothing resembling either hegemony or a traditional balance of power. In terms of ‘official’ and substantive alignments, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), brought together Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, and has remained active since 1981. But this belied the fact that the six states had often dramatically different foreign policies, with Oman operating almost aloof from the rest, while Qatar strongly resisted perceived Saudi-Emirati attempts to dominate both the alignment and Gulf region. The GCC, despite its longevity, remained mainly an economic bloc, well short of a traditional military defense pact and active alliance

in that sense. The GCC also underscored the regime-to-regime (rather than country-to-country) nature of many regional alliances, for instance with the Saudi and Emirati military intervention in Bahrain in 2011 in support of the Bahraini regime, but against the Bahraini popular movement in the streets that had demanded significant reform and change.

Still, the GCC was part of what Saudi Arabia saw as the foundation for a broader Saudi-led regional bloc held together by shared perception of the threat posed by Iran, a bloc that would also include states like Egypt and Jordan – all allies also of the United States. But as the several-year Saudi-Emirate blockade of Qatar seemed to indicate, not all states in this bloc were really going along for the ride (Ramani 2021). And even those that were, like Jordan and Egypt, seemed desperate to avoid get dragged into military misadventures led by their erstwhile allies, such as the Saudi-Emirate military intervention in the Yemen war. Meanwhile, in the years before the Gaza war, the United States under both the Trump and Biden administrations were singularly focused on formally bringing Israel into this regional bloc via the Abraham Accords and an eagerly sought follow-on deal to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

That alignment did not compel a single policy stance on all regional issues, however. Despite the 2017-21 intra-GCC rift and the Saudi-led blockade, Qatar held firm to its policy stances, and it even increased its cooperation with regional power Turkey to support Islamist movements across the region. The Turkish-Qatari alliance therefore amounted to an alternative major alignment in the region beyond the blocs led by rival regional powers like Saudi Arabia or Iran. An additional bloc also emerged, but not one vying for regional power or with any pretensions regarding the regional order. With a decidedly less ideological or ideational tilt, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq created a new alignment – a “New Mashreq” or “al-Sham al-Jadeed” -- focused on pragmatic cooperation (especially in energy sectors like electricity, oil, and gas), in sharp contrast to its more sectarian or ideologically-charged counterparts (al-Maleki 2021, Ryan 2020b).

In contrast to the fairly conventional attempts at alliances and alignments noted above, Damascus and Tehran led an “Axis of Resistance” – to Israel and to Western imperialism – which brought together Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas. The “Axis of Resistance” represented a very different kind of alliance. Traditional Realist scholarship has long focused on alliances as defense pacts between *states*, but this regional alignment included both regional states and non-state actors, and tied itself at times to a non-regional power – Russia. Just as importantly, while the revisionist axis was less of a formal bloc, it appeared at times to be the more effective regional alliance, in the sense the members actually attempted to help each other even in military terms. Hezbollah and Iran, for example, had each sent military support to defend the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war.

During the Gaza war, Hezbollah and Iran each at times launched strikes against Israel to support Hamas and perhaps the Palestinian people. Even the Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen attacked Red Sea shipping in a similar attempt to support Hamas in Gaza. Israel, meanwhile, assassinated Hezbollah and Hamas leaders in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran, and launched airstrikes and missile attacks on Lebanon, while Iran and Israel exchanged volleys of missile and drone strikes. As strikes and counter-strikes continued, the threat of a broader regional war steadily increased. It is telling that there were few signs of internal disagreements or defections within this regional bloc despite the intensity of the escalating conflict and the setbacks suffered by key nodes such as Hezbollah.

In contrast to the revisionist axis, alternative alignments such as the GCC, or any other inter-Arab alignment, looked even more weak and ineffectual during the lengthy Gaza war and these expanding regional tensions. No Arab state rose to defend the Palestinian people, regardless of whether that state supported Hamas or not. None seemed to be able to use their influence to change the policy stances of either Israel or its main external supporter, the United States. The U.S., in fact, seemed proficient only in a negative way – providing munitions to Israel –

while appearing incompetent in turns of delivering aid to Palestinians and simply unwilling to exert any of its power to actually force a ceasefire, even with the looming threat of an expanding regional war.

The U.S. role in providing arms for the Israeli bombing campaign in Gaza -- that lasted over a year -- also served to undermine U.S. influence still further in regional affairs, and even threatened to undermine the regional regimes seen as closest to Washington, like Jordan. Jordanian government officials and even the king condemned Israeli actions in terms far harsher than usual in Jordanian diplomacy and foreign policy, and even supported the genocide case in the International Court of Justice, brought by South Africa against Israel. But despite its relations and peace treaty with Israel, as well as its extensive ties to the U.S., Jordan seemed to have no influence or effect on either country to change their policies and end the war.

Domestic pressures over the Gaza war steadily grew within Jordanian politics, with protesters marching and demanding that the Hashemite state cut Israel off from supplies moving overland from the Gulf and that it end its peace treaty with Israel. This domestic challenge reached a crescendo when Iran launched missile and drone attacks on Israel, and Jordanian forces shot down those that were crossing Jordanian airspace. For the regime, this was a reflexive act protecting national security; but many Jordanian protesters and other citizens were outraged, charging that Jordan was defending Israel even as its Gaza campaign continued unabated. This domestic uproar brings us back to the issue of regional alliances: as grassroots protesters often condemned the state for operating as a *de facto* ally of Israel, while the Hashemite regime saw itself as very much allied with Arab states and the Palestinian Authority, while maintaining at best a cold peace – but not an alliance – with the state of Israel.

The Gaza war itself seemed to have, at least temporarily, destroyed the former Trump administration's attempt at an Arab-Israeli coalition via the Abraham Accords. Morocco, Bahrain, and the UAE had indeed normalized relations with Israel. But any potential for Israeli-Saudi

normalization in 2023 or 2024 was dashed by the Gaza war and its staggering death toll. Egypt and Qatar, meanwhile, attempted – largely unsuccessfully – to act as mediators negotiating a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. While not directly opposed to each other, the various Arab alignments also seemed to represent status quo versus revisionist powers in the region. But they also represented very different conceptualizations of regional order, invariably designed around themselves. Yet none seemed capable of achieving their visions or even of stopping a devastating and expanding regional war.

Conclusions

In 2023-24, the entire Middle East region was shaken by the destruction of the war in Gaza. While Israel saw itself as fighting a war with Hamas, much of the region and much of the world saw a devastating civilian death toll against an essentially captive population, since Palestinians in Gaza had nowhere to go. But the war and the civilian death toll also mobilized domestic politics across the region, with Arab publics demanding that their own regimes respond. These dynamics, both domestic and regional, shook the regional system of alliances and alignments, as even Arab states that previously had closer relations with Israel were forced to reassess everything from normalization agreements, to alliance commitments, and perhaps even to existing peace treaties.

Contemporary alliances across the Middle East in the post-Arab Spring era included at least four significant alignments within a volatile multipolar system, some representing sectarian revisionism, some pragmatic cooperation. But given their looseness and informality, Middle East alignments can also at times be in the eye of the beholder. Rather than see the region structured among the four assorted blocs noted above, for example, Israel (before the Gaza war) had increasingly seen itself as part of a broader “moderate axis” that included Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and perhaps Morocco (Voller 2015). This doesn't mean that Israel's Arab neighbors shared this view, even before the Gaza war, but even less so in light of the 2023-24 Israel-Hamas war and the

destruction of Gaza. Rather, many Arab regimes seemed to see either a five or six-way Arab axis that included all the above states, but *not* Israel, while others saw a de facto Israeli-Saudi-Emirate axis (especially in the Trump years, and hence before the Gaza war) as a rising force in regional politics.

However conceived, in both perception and more concrete reality, the region is clearly characterized by multiple alliances and alignments, including but not limited to the Saudi- and Iranian-led blocs. But all these alignments remained fluid despite their best attempts to institutionalize their blocs via diplomacy, summits, agreements, and communiqués. They remained, in short, more aspirational than effective, with the many trappings of state interactions and linkages, but with little actual effect. As Kausch notes, “while institutionalised multilateral cooperation is increasingly being hollowed out, ad hoc multilateralism is on the rise in the MENA region. Long-term comprehensive alignments will be the exception rather than the rule. In trying to tackle trans-national security threats and other shared challenges, switching and issue-based alliances will be the new normal” (Kausch 2014).

From the Arab uprisings to the Gaza war, the Middle East has been characterized by multipolarity and shifting alliances and alignments, as had been the case in years past. Yet even by regional standards, regional multipolarity and alliance fluidity seemed more volatile than usual, with multiple blocs, ententes, and alignments – some affective and aspirational, some that do in fact exist but remain weak and ineffective, and none that approximate the traditional defense pact idea of a formal alliance. The region is also characterized by multipolarity of multiple different types: political, economic, military, and even ideological – leading to multiple levels of material and ideational contention across the Middle East. With multipolarity being a key feature of the global stage as well, Middle East alliances and alignments would continue to align and realign in response to changing threats to regime security across the region, as states search for security, assurance, balance, stability, or even survival. Yet all these

were likely to remain elusive amid state weakness, regime insecurity, and the rising threat of a broader regional war.

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