

Middle East Crisis and the Role of Regional and Alien Actors

Safdar Ali

Ph.D Scholar

*Institute of International Relations,
Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur Sindh, Pakistan.*

Dr. Amir Ahmed Khuhro

Professor

*Institute of International Relations,
Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur Sindh, Pakistan.*

Abstract:

The Middle East continues to be a strategically critical landscape in an increasingly inter-connected, globalised world order. It contains more than half of the world's oil reserves, abundant hydrocarbons such as natural gas and is rich in minerals. This research revolves around game theory or strategy of conflict that conflicts in international politics can be modelled as a bargaining game that includes mutual interests as well as conflicting interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The idea of studying a conflict as a cooperative game is at first sight counterintuitive, because having a conflict is the result of having opposing interests. The proposed research analyses the multiple alliances and conflicts that underpin the region's political and security challenges, looking at how these have enabled opportunity structures for alternative authorities on the ground but also at the international level. It explains how commercial interactions with the Middle East have allowed alien to adopt a panoramic, comprehensive strategy for the region, one that has undermined Western influence.

Key words: Middle East, Iran, Saudi Conflicts, regional actors, alien actors

Middle East: An Introduction:

The world we live in always seems to contain wars and conflicts. Just by looking back over 100 years, history is filled with major wars like the two World Wars, the constant scare of escalation of threat during the Cold War and more recently political turmoil, tense situation and proxy war in Middle East. Despite the fact that people always talk about the need for peace, the world is instead filled with fear and constant security threats. Middle East is a rather imprecise term describing a geographical area that extends from Egypt to Afghanistan, or the cultural region in which Islam arose and developed.

The Middle East is the natural crossroads of the Afro-Eurasian landmass. It is also the “land of the seven seas.” It lies athwart the water route from southern Ukraine to the Mediterranean, via the Black Sea, the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, the Dardanelles, and the Aegean Sea. In various eras an area between the Nile Delta and the Sinai Peninsula has been adapted to facilitate shipping between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, which in turn has served as a highway to Asia and East Africa.¹



Source: <http://www.google.com>

Different researchers and the experts produce informative writings on multidimensional issues of the Middle East. As Benjamin MacQueen provide an expansive survey of Middle East politics, thoroughly revised and restructured in response to events currently taking place.²

Kim ghatass explores how Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, once allies and twin pillars of US strategy in the region, became mortal enemies after 1979. She shows how they used and distorted religion in a competition that went well beyond geopolitics. Feeding intolerance, suppressing cultural expression, and encouraging sectarian violence from Egypt to Pakistan, the war for cultural supremacy led to Iran's fatwa against author Salman Rushdie, the assassination of countless intellectuals, the birth of groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, the September 11th terrorist attacks, and the rise of ISIS.³

This area gets more than its share of the news: Arab-Israeli wars (or possibly peace), assassinations, oil, Iran's revolution, terrorism, the Gulf War, and the US occupation of Iraq. Current events in the Middle East affect us as individuals, as members of religious or ethnic groups, and as citizens of our countries.⁴

In the Middle East, internal violence, including some attacks of a terrorist nature, threatens mainly Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Israel, and the Palestinian territories. Counterterrorist efforts by some Middle Eastern and foreign governments threaten civilians and public figures a like far more than al-Qa'ida and its affiliates.

The Middle East has undergone a radical transformation since the 2011 Arab uprisings. Arab states have either been severely weakened or have collapsed; territorial boundaries are fragile and no longer impervious amid devastating, far-reaching transnational conflict. Regional actors, who have augmented their military capacity since the war on ISIS started, have reverted to old geopolitical rivalries and inter-state confrontations.

Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Syrian civil war and the emergence of ISIS, the future of Arab statehood in the Middle East has taken an uncertain turn. The Arab state system has been engulfed by crisis and tested like never before in its modern history. As institutions declined or collapsed in the run-up to and during the course of political tumult and conflict, so too did the relationship between citizen and state, resulting in the emergence of powerful sub-state actors who have capitalised on socio-economic grievances, the breakdown in security and the collapse of political and institutional orders.

The decline of the Arab state shifted power away from those who had traditionally wielded it, the political and military elites that historically suppressed challenges to the state from dissidents and rebel groups, using both persecution and coercion. Armed non-state actors, at times enabled and empowered by these same state actors, thus emerged as important wielders of authority and have since exacerbated and exploited ethnic and sectarian divisions to produce far-reaching, bloody and transnational conflicts that have destroyed the fabric of societies across the whole Middle eastern region.⁵

In 2014, the ISIS established itself in this region and for more than three years, despite the sustained efforts of global powers and their allies to contain and defeat it, this ragtag force established and managed its own proto-state and rendered meaningless the once unshakeable, sacrosanct borders of Syria and Iraq.

During the same period, Shiite militia groups in Iraq organised into the umbrella militia organisation known as the Hashd al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs). Its 100,000 strong fighters filled the vacuum left by the collapse of the US-trained Iraqi army after ISIS seized Mosul in June 2014. In both Iraq and Syria, but also other countries like Libya and Yemen, armed non-state actors have supplanted the state in the provision of services and security, in partnership with other grassroots actors such as tribes, civil society and clerics. In each of these countries, it is irregular militia groups that have undertaken the fighting, be it in the war against ISIS or intra-

state conflict between different factional groups, sometimes on the basis of ethnicity or sect.

Regional and alien actors will grapple over power, resources and post-conflict power-sharing. Armed groups that end up integrating into the state will aim to reconfigure the state according to their own ideologies and worldviews. Fundamentally, the contestation over the state is unfolding in radically transformed military theatres. Since the multiple civil wars in the region first began, transnational networks have expanded, as have shared inter-state rivalries and the availability of capable armed groups looking for willing patrons. Syria's civil war may have produced winners in Iran and its allies, and losers in the Arab world and the West, but that does not mean the end of the contestation.

Conflicts in Middle East:

Main conflicts in Middle East which cause of regional rivalry and alien attraction in region.

South Yemen Insurgency (2009–2015)

The conflict has its roots in the failure of a political transition supposed to bring stability to Yemen following an Arab Spring uprising that forced its long time authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to hand over power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, in 2011. As president, Mr Hadi struggled to deal with a variety of problems, including attacks by jihadists, a separatist movement in the south, the continuing loyalty of security personnel to Saleh, as well as corruption, unemployment and food insecurity.

Arab Spring (2010)

The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that enveloped several largely Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain. The events in these nations generally began in the spring of 2011, which led to the name. However, the political and social impact of these popular uprisings remains significant today, years after many of them ended.

The Arab Spring was a loosely related group of protests that ultimately resulted in regime changes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Not all of the movements, however, could be deemed successful—at least if the end goal was increased democracy and cultural freedom.

Egyptian crisis (2011–2014)

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has resigned and handed over power to the military, ousted by a historic 18-day wave of anti-government demonstrations. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took part in the protests aimed at forcing the long time leader out of office. The unprecedented protests on the streets of Cairo caught the world's attention. Here's a brief look at how the situation in Egypt evolved:

Yemeni Crisis (2011)

Yemen's mounting internal divisions and a Saudi-led military intervention have spawned an escalating political, military, and humanitarian crisis. Yemen faces its biggest crisis in decades with the overthrow of its government by the Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite movement, and the resulting offensive led by Saudi Arabia. The fighting, and a Saudi-imposed blockade ostensibly meant to enforce an arms embargo, has had devastating humanitarian consequences, causing more than one million people to become internally displaced and leading to cholera outbreaks, medicine shortages, and threats of famine. The United Nations calls the humanitarian crisis in Yemen "*the worst in the world.*"

Syrian Civil War (2011)

More than 250,000 Syrians have lost their lives in four-and-a-half years of armed conflict, which began with anti-government protests before escalating into a full-scale civil war. More than 11 million others have been forced from their homes as forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and those opposed to his rule battle each other - as well as jihadist militants from so-called Islamic State.

Pro-democracy protests erupted in March 2011 in the southern city of Deraa after the arrest and torture of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. After security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing several, more took to the streets.

Iran–Saudi Arabia Proxy Conflict (2011)

Saudi Arabia and Iran - two powerful neighbours - are locked in a fierce struggle for regional dominance. The decades-old feud between them is exacerbated by religious differences. They each follow one of the two main branches of Islam - Iran is largely Shia Muslim, while Saudi Arabia sees itself as the leading Sunni Muslim power.

This religious schism is reflected in the wider map of the Middle East, where other countries have Shia or Sunni majorities, some of whom look towards Iran or Saudi Arabia for support or guidance. Historically Saudi Arabia, a monarchy and home to the birthplace of Islam, saw itself as the leader of the Muslim world. However this was challenged in 1979 by the Islamic revolution in Iran which created a new type of state in the region - a kind of revolutionary theocracy - that had an explicit goal of exporting this model beyond its own borders.

Iraqi Civil War and ISI (2014–2017)

The Iraqi Civil War has brought a severe humanitarian disaster to Northern Iraq, with more than 60,000 deaths and more than three million internally displaced persons. In January 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which rapidly grew during the Syrian Civil War, seized Fallujah city in Al-Anbar Province. This operation was considered the first major success for ISIS in Iraq. After that, ISIS occupied a number of Northern Iraqi cities and towns, including Mosul and Tikrit, by June 2014. On 29 June 2014, ISIS announced the establishment of a new caliphate, named the Islamic State (IS), with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its caliph. The ISIS was responsible for a great number of massacres (such as Sinjar Massacre of the Yezidi while in control. Over the period 2015–2016, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), militant groups, and Kurdish forces (also called Peshmerga) were contesting ISIS, retaking cities including

Tikrit. In October 2016, the ISF, with allied militias and an international alliance, launched an offensive, named the “We Are Coming, Nineveh” campaign, in Mosul. After long fierce battles in Mosul, the Iraqi government announced victory over ISIS in July 2017, indicating the almost complete collapse of ISIS in Iraq.

Many are others bundle of conflicts in region which cause of directly turmoil for the cultural, socio-economic and socio-political of the habitants. like, Western Iran clashes (2016), Turkish coup attempt (2016), Iraqi–Kurdish conflict (2017–2017), Iraqi insurgency (2017), Persian Gulf crisis (2018–2019)

Role of Regional Actors in Middle East:

As the only oil producer with sufficient spare capacity to shape the world economy, Saudi Arabia is one of the most significant states in twenty-first century geopolitics. Despite the enormous potential for Saudi Arabia to play a more robust regional and international role, the Kingdom faces serious internal and external challenges in the form of political incapacity and competition with states such as regional rivalry Iran.

As Saudi Arabia prepares for a generational shift brought about by an ageing leadership, the rapidly changing balance of power in the Middle East offers both great opportunity and great danger. Further, the sectarian divisions within Islamic society represent the ground on which state and non-state actors cultivate mutual hatred to achieve political goals in the Middle East.

The diplomatic relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia have faced various and changing moments, depending on internal and external reasons to the borders of the two actors: if, before the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, historically the two states had a rather fruitful dialogue, both committed in avoiding the Soviet penetration and against the Nasserian pan-Arabism, whose culminating event was the “*twin-pillar policy*”⁶

of the 70s, established by the US President of the time, Richard Nixon, with whom Iran and Saudi Arabia cooperated in safeguarding American interests in the region; after the power seizure of Ayatollah Khomeini and the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI,79), the relation between them changed drastically in favor of a game of influence and military demonstration in the Middle East.

Since 2011, then, and with the beginning of the Arab Springs, Iran and Saudi Arabia started backing opposing sides in different countries: in Syria, KSA is lined up with the rebel groups, strongly opposed to the Iran-supported President Assad; in Yemen, Saudi Arabia stands for the Hadi government against the Houthi rebels, backed by Iran; in Lebanon, the government is sustained by Hezbollah, an ally of Tehran, while KSA has as an ally the Sunni opposition; In Iraq, Baghdad's victory against ISIS, that arose from the Sunni area, strengthened the Shiite role in the country; finally, in Bahrain, the allied KSA monarchy rules over a Shiite majority, who looks favorably on Tehran. All this reflects the duel of geopolitical influence taking place in the region.⁷

There are two huge geopolitical aspirations of the two countries: the guide of the Islamic world and the economic and political dominance in the Middle East; both of these suction are challenging not only by the instability in the region, the presence of foreign navies and terroristic organizations but above all by each other; nevertheless, Tehran and Riyadh know well that a frontal and destructive war does not benefit either of them, as it is difficult to predict the outcome, and that fighting the wars of the others (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain) is the safest solution to extend influence and power.⁸

Anyhow, the Saudi-Iran hegemonic rivalry is continuing. “Only when the costs should raise to a level that either side might see as threatening its regional or domestic standing, might there be a noticeable reduction of tensions”⁹

However, a realistic consideration must be made for the role of the alien and regional actors to solve the issues of Middle

East With the violence in hotspots in the Middle East, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, seems to have no end. The future of their relationship will in most cases remain a zero-sum fight, always if Iran will have the economic and geopolitical strength to continue its hegemonic-revisionist vision of the Middle East map.

The Alien actor's role in Middle East:

To understand the recent tightening of the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to analyze their ideological foundations, the ground on which Tehran and Riyadh build the regional alliances with state and non-state actors, their economic and geopolitical interests in the hegemonic control of the Middle East, and finally the specific context of some chosen states, in which the Arab Springs have upset the internal balances, leaving room for the two regional powers to fill the gap in the chaos. It identifies the reasons for the Middle Eastern geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in a political-economic key, but it does not exclude an important factor such as the ideological-religious one.

Amid the recently emerged politics of conflict, intra-state wars and the collapse or weakening of state institutions, alongside the weakening or demolition of the old regional order of grand authoritarian bargains reinforced by Western actors, opportunity structures have enabled alternative powers to either contest or replace the US as the preeminent force in the region.

Russia's Role in Middle East

Russia's resurgence in the Middle East also comes amid an increasingly assertive China. Its global ambitions to challenge the Western-led international order has manifested itself through the inroads Beijing has made into cash-poor Middle East countries through investment and reconstruction packages, within the ambit of its "One Belt One Road" vision.¹⁰

Since Russia's 2015 intervention (with the help of Iran) in Syria reversed the course of the war there in favour of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow has asserted itself as a credible alternative to the US through arms sales, economic

deals and diplomatic manoeuvring. Russia has attempted to keep and possibly expand its reach in the region since the 1970s, when the US managed to pull Egypt out of Soviet influence and place it squarely into the Western camp. But it is only in the last 15 years that Russia's economic revival and reinvigorated foreign policy assertiveness in a region that has otherwise been considered a US backyard has seen it exploit and capitalise on geopolitical and economic openings.¹¹

Just days before the Kurdish independence referendum, Russia's energy giant Rosneft took ownership of Kurdistan's oil export pipelines to Turkey, in return for 1.8 billion US dollars, despite objections from Baghdad.¹² The deal effectively cemented Russia's political influence in Iraq, if not the region as a whole. In Libya, Russian military officials have established a close relationship with Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. At the same time, Moscow has signed oil agreements with the UN-backed rival government in Tripoli, whereby Russia could position itself as a critical arbiter of peace between the country's competing factions.¹³ Libya could, therefore, empower Russia's negotiating hand against the West, not least since a standoff and instability in Libya could allow Russia to use mass migration from Libya as leverage against Europe. In addition to its status recognition since the Syria conflict erupted, Russia has seen its geostrategic gains matched by its soft power projection. Russia does have a military strategy for the region but it is primarily focused on the Mediterranean according to observers, who also consider Moscow's engagements in the Middle East as being ad-hoc and opportunistic.¹⁴ Syria's geostrategic position provides an entry into the region and access to the Mediterranean – it is Moscow's most important foothold in the Arab world and its closest ally.

US Indulgence in Middle East:

The West has a legacy of conflict in the region and support for autocrats, the US and its European allies have also invested billions of dollars into the promotion of good governance and civil society. Despite resentment toward Western meddling in the Middle East region, the US and its allies have established themselves as pioneers of democratic

norms and much of the region continue to associate these with the West. The same cannot, and most likely will not, be said about Russia and China in the coming years.

For much of the 20th century, US interests in the region were secured through the so-called “Twin Pillars” strategy whereby Iran and Saudi Arabia were empowered and identified as pillars of regional security and beneficiaries of US military equipment. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, more recent challenges include intra-state conflict, asymmetric warfare and violent extremism in the Middle East, which have largely eclipsed the risk of inter-state conflict and the prospect of a war of ideologies and supremacy between the alien US and Russia.¹⁵

Under the conflict-averse former US president Barack Obama, the US carried out more drone strikes in the then president’s first year than former President George W. Bush carried out during his entire presidency, including a total of 563 strikes.¹⁶

The US now has approximately 50,000 troops in the Middle East, including troops in key Arab Gulf states, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt, in addition to a sizeable infrastructure of sophisticated, technologically superior fighter planes, surveillance aircraft and unmanned drones.¹⁷

The US has intervened proactively in the region, both militarily and politically, to bolster friendly governments, selectively promote democratic and pro-market reforms, and counter threats to US interests, Beijing has striven to secure cordial, “baggage free” relations across the region.

China in Middle East:

China engages the Middle East with little historical baggage. China’s economic success and rise as an alternative to the US in the region. its historical and social traditions resemble the Middle East’s more closely. China’s soft power has been amplified by growing educational and cultural links. In recent years, Beijing has backed motions that condemn the Israeli occupation in adjacent areas, In 2012 it supported Palestine’s bid to become a UN non-member observer state and it has also

pressured Israel to unconditionally implement UN resolutions demanding Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories.¹⁸

China has found openings to assert its presence in a region where it has never constituted a traditional power. China's exponential economic growth saw its turnover of contracted projects along the New Silk Road almost double from 30 billion US dollars to 57 billion between 2008 and 2014, prompting concerns over its "offensive mercantilism" and global "One Belt" vision.¹⁹

This growth has resulted in greater Chinese involvement in a region that provides a critical source of energy. China is currently among the top three importers from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. The energy imperative that underscores Chinese engagement with the region is crystallising its relations into strategic alliances, as opposed to transactional relationships.

Indeed, the Israel–Iran crisis may yet become China's first major test as a preeminent player in the Middle East, since a direct confrontation could undermine its regional interests and objectives. Moreover, China's internment camps for Muslims and the forced deportation of Uighurs in the Arab world, initiated at the request of the Chinese government, could have implications for Beijing's relationship with the region and undermine its efforts to match the soft power projection of its Western rivals.

Conclusion:

The international system is a state of nature, where the most important actors, the states, look for their interests: maximize, increase, and demonstrate the power to maintain the status quo, not to risk their security and show to the others their prestige, both with real material elements both with the use of the deterrence strategy.

The international system is not a safe or fair arena, states are in constant in search of power and maximizing the power of a state means reducing that of another one in a zero-sum term. This makes the relationship between actors challenging, with the

constant fear that someone else could become a danger for the security and survival of the country.

The alien like US still retains an expansive military infrastructure, affording it a wide-ranging and technologically superior presence that its antagonists cannot rival or contest. Russia and China have burnished their credentials amid US disengagement from the region and popular resentment toward Western expenditures that have failed to yield dividends. But Russia and China have yet to establish themselves as credible alternatives, despite their growing assertiveness. the region has had limited social and cultural interactions with Russia and China but the current trajectory suggests this could change in the coming years, assuming Russia and China remain committed to ongoing geostrategic investment.²⁰.

The alien powers and its allies have established themselves as top-down and bottom-up partners, pioneering values and democratic norms that the region has come to associate them with. Thus, the future of the Middle East is therefore uncertain: the two regional powers Saudi and Iran feed their rivalry, preventing any dialogue.

References:

- ¹ Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. & Lawrence Davidson, *A Concise History of Middle East*, Westview press, Philadelphia, USA, 2010, p. 07
- ² Benjamin MacQueen, *An Introduction to Middle East Politics*, Sage Publishers, London, 2017
- ³ Kim ghatass, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East*, Henry Holt and Company publishing, New York, 2020
- ⁴ Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. & Lawrence Davidson, op. cit., p. 05
- ⁵ Ranj Alaaldin, *Shaping the Political Order of the Middle East: Crisis and Opportunity*, institute of Affari Internazionali (IAI) 2019, p. 02, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep19671>, p. 06
- ⁶ Lewis Sanders IV, “*Saudi Arabia vs. Iran: From 'twin pillars' to proxy wars*”, <<Deutsche Welle>>, 8th November 2017 <https://p.dw.com/p/2nI2N>
- ⁷ Antonio Marando, *Saudi Arabia-Iran Rivalry: Supremacy And Instability In The Middle East*, Vytautas Magnus University, 2020, p. 8
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 9
- ⁹ Ali Fathollah-Nejad, “*The Iranian–Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry*” *Iran Matters*, 25th October 2017 <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iranian-saudi-hegemonic-rivalry>.
- ¹⁰ Ranj Alaaldin, *Shaping the Political Order of the Middle East: Crisis and Opportunity*, institute of Affari Internazionali (IAI) 2019, p. 02, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep19671>
- ¹¹ Ibid, p.07
- ¹² Dmitry Zhdannikov, “*The Great Russian Oil Game in Iraqi Kurdistan*”, in *Reuters*, 19 April 2018, <https://reut.rs/2qIdy7k>.
- ¹³ Boriz Zilberman and Romany Shaker, “*Russia and Egypt Are Growing Closer*”, in *The American Interest*, 6 June 2018, <https://wp.me/p4ja0Z-L8n>.
- ¹⁴ Liz Sly, “*In the Middle East, Russia Is Back*”, in *The Washington Post*, 5 December 2018, <https://wapo.st/2GbOnEL>.
- ¹⁵ Ranj Alaaldin, *Shaping the Political Order of the Middle East: Crisis and Opportunity*, institute of Affari Internazionali (IAI) 2019, p. 02, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep19671>, p.05
- ¹⁶ Jessica Purkiss and Jack Serle, “*Obama’s Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush*”, in *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 17 January 2017, <https://www>.

thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush.

- ¹⁷ Heritage Foundation, “Middle East”, in *Global Operating Environment. 2019 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, October 2018, p. 153-171, <https://www.heritage.org/node/7757425>. Qatar, for example hosts the biggest US military base in the region, while the US 5th Fleet is stationed in Bahrain
- ¹⁸ Samuel Ramani, “Why Palestine Supports China on the South China Sea”, in *The Diplomat*, 26 July 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/?p=90127>.
- ¹⁹ Jonathan Holslag, “How China’s New Silk Road Threatens European Trade”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (March 2017), p. 57-58, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/7490>.
- ²⁰ Nour Youssef, “Egyptian Police Detain Uighurs and Deport Them to China”, in *The New York Times*, 6 July 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2uQfDhn>