

New Perspectives on Middle East Politics

**Economy, Society,
and International
Relations**

**Edited by
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Introduction

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This book is designed to be a companion textbook for the study of the politics in the modern Middle East, including reference to the domestic, regional, and international levels. It is aimed at the interested casual reader and those taking a course or degree at the undergraduate or graduate level with a major Middle East studies or Middle East politics component. The volume provides details on the most pressing and significant emerging threats in the Middle East, as well as shaping forces to regional interactions and (lack of) cooperation with extra-regional actors.

The focus of the volume is the period post the Arab Uprisings (also known as ‘Arab revolutions’ but since so much blood has been spilt and due to the uncertainty and expected longevity of the transitions involved, rarely referred to as the Arab Spring any more). However, there is a keen sense that these issues are constantly evolving, as can be seen by references from 2019 up to the point of publication in 2020. By combining different disciplinary approaches, the book contributes to a growing literature on the nexus between political science, Middle East politics, and area studies. Above all, it aims to highlight key international relations and Middle East concepts, themes and issues that will continue to impact socioeconomic, sociosecurity, and sociopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. These are discussed in detail in each chapter and are clearly explained in the ‘Glossary, Actors, and Abbreviations’ section.

In Chapter 1, Mason and Hendy discuss the political economy of the Middle East in broad terms, zeroing in on specific issues such as demography and youth issues. Next, in Chapter 2, Mason and Arakji outline the significance of the military in many of the governance structures dominating Middle East politics and economics, how civil-military relations have

evolved over time, and the prospects for reform. Mabon and AlRefai argue in Chapter 3 that soft power and geopolitical competition have once again come to threaten cohesion, consensus, and permeability in the Middle East, especially after the Arab Uprisings, where weak and failed states have become new battlegrounds for regional influence. They employ the cases of Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as Qatar and the UAE in illustrating the resonance of political competition through religious and sports perspectives.

In Chapter 4, Mason and Partrick go on to explore the dual phenomena of regionalized and internationalized conflict, looking specifically at the cases of Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Diwan, in Chapter 5, builds nicely on the previous chapter by discussing how middle oil per capita countries such as Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen have experienced a dual curse: using oil rents for greater social repression and also distrusting autonomy in the economy, representing repression of the market. He finds, among other conclusions, that regional and international rivalry does not contribute to the preconditions for a political settlement. In Chapter 6, Mason and Casula provide historical, contemporary, and forward-looking perspectives on the international community, including the effects of decades of US policies in the Middle East, and challenges and opportunities presented by the EU, Russia, and China in the region, also through alliance choices. In Chapter 7, Mason and Abdelraouf explore the environment as an emerging and potentially major challenge to governments and societies across the region with reference to climate change, water politics, governance issues, and food security. They focus on the cases of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Egypt. In so doing, they highlight how environmental politics will form an increasingly important and urgent element of national development plans. Should they fail to be taken into proper consideration, the risks could become exponential, particularly for vulnerable communities. In Chapter 8, Mason discusses the Israel-Palestine conflict as an ongoing shaping factor in Middle East politics and how its persistence highlights the importance of political will, sovereignty, alliance patterns, and asymmetric warfare as decisive concepts in the region's governance, politics, and security.

Defining the Middle East

The term 'Middle East' was first coined by Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1901 and made popular in speeches by Sir Mark Sykes of Sykes-Picot fame or, rather, notoriety. Indeed, the secret Sykes-Picot agreement signed in 1916 for the partition of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, along with the Balfour Declaration in 1917 in which the British government announced support for the establishment of a national

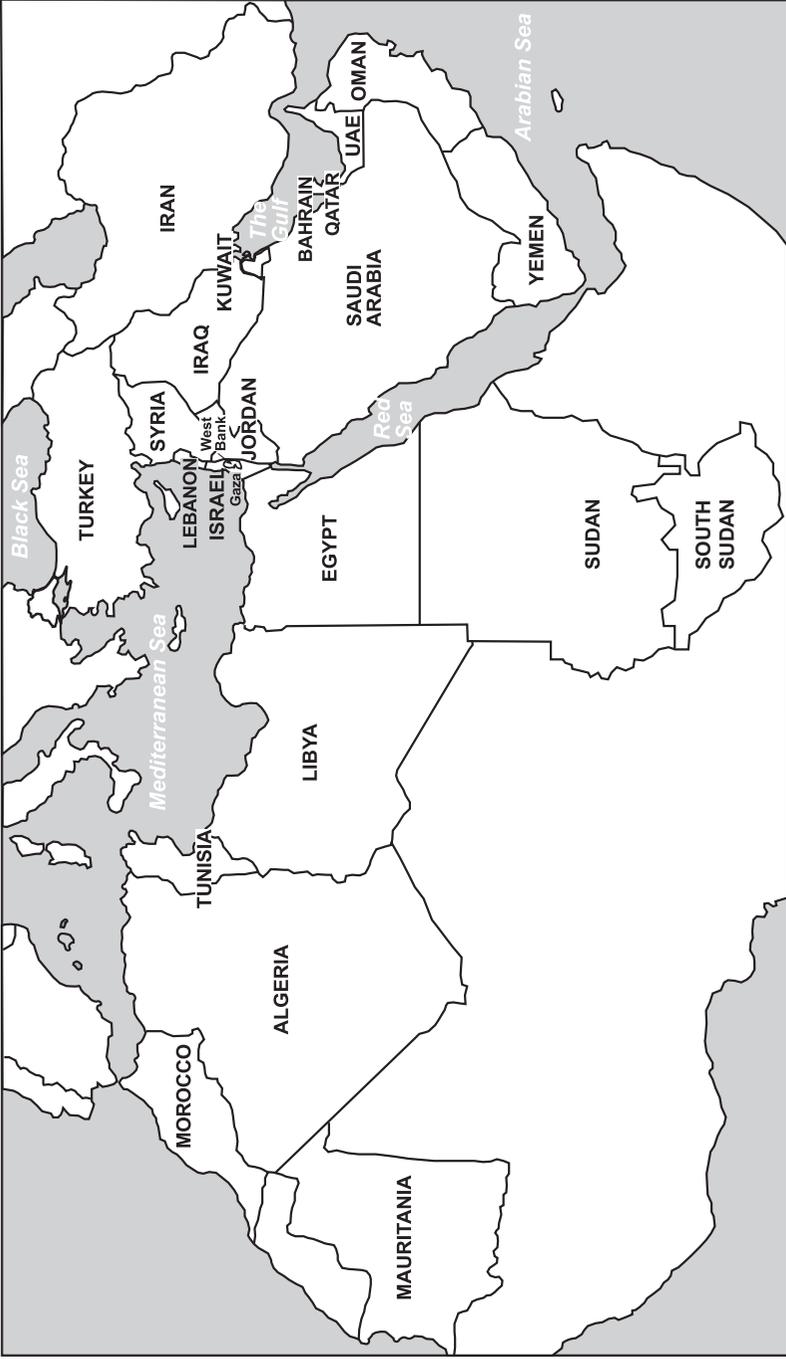
home for the Jewish people in Palestine, is a key, contentious, and enduring feature of the Middle East.¹ ‘Near East’ was a term used in the British and American policy communities up until the Second World War, and beyond for many Americans. Both terms have become synonymous with great power relationships and core-periphery relations from dependency theory, including Western engagement and intervention, predominantly in the twentieth century.

The Middle East is generally considered to include the Arab states (i.e., those that form the League of Arab States) from Morocco in the east to Oman in the west, plus Iran, Israel, and Turkey, as Map I.1 illustrates. Although these states are diverse in their histories and traditions, they are also generally similar in their linguistic, ethnic, and/or religious composition. Hence, the Levant (including Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and Cyprus but with special emphasis on the former French mandates of Lebanon and Syria) and North Africa (including the Maghreb states of Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) can be considered to form part of a contiguous region. At times, due to geostrategic expediency, such as the G. W. Bush administration’s Global War on Terror, regional definitions have shifted to include states such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whether scholars and policymakers should focus on geographic areas or issue-specific ‘communities’ in their study of Middle East politics and international affairs is an ongoing area for debate.

What is known as the Middle East in the United States and Europe is often known as West Asia in other parts of Asia, especially in states such as India and China. As these states become more prominent in international affairs, also through studies pertaining to the region in the twenty-first century, so too will their definitions and discourses. Infrastructure projects such as those in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), will do much to determine the future location of Pakistan in specific or various spheres of influence. Interestingly, West Asia often includes the Caucasus and excludes Egypt in favor of locating it in Africa. Changes may be evident over time as growing awareness, new regional studies, or further transnational connections blur or shift conceptual parameters.

Problematizing the Study of the Middle East

There are a number of pitfalls in the study of the Middle East, which generally fall into the following categories. First, studies can be superficial in nature, focusing on outcomes such as conflicts, terrorism, or refugees, rather than the multifaceted history and societies that make up the context for the dynamics being played out on the ground. Second, and related



Map 1.1 Map of the Middle East.

to the first, is the lack of connectivity between area studies scholars in the global south and international relations scholars in the West who are often unable to explain Middle East politics. There are some notable exceptions that have managed to locate the Middle East as a subsystem of international relations.² Historical awareness plays a vital part in explaining the interactions (or lack thereof) between the newly created states of the Middle East and the rest of the world. This includes awareness about the expansion of the early Islamic Caliphates through to European colonialism, the legacies of which include the Israel-Palestine conflict, Iran's hostility toward the West, and the fraught relationship between Turkey and Europe and between France and Algeria.³

Third, the Middle East and international actors have experienced a number of social, economic, political, and security trends, events, and inconsistent policies over the past forty years, which make generalizations about Middle East politics appear quite unconvincing. At the international level, the region has experienced a transition from a Cold War to a post-Cold War order whereby US hegemony has been exercised from the end of 1991. Approximately a decade later, the second intifada and the Arab Peace Plan put the Israel-Palestine conflict back on international foreign policy agendas but to little effect. The United States responded to the 9/11 attacks with huge US military resources deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, using bases such as Diego Garcia and Al Udeid in Qatar to project power. The G. W. Bush administration's Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) focused on addressing the denial of public freedoms in the region and proposed direct funding to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the formation of a body to monitor progress. It was short on realistic assessment as to the nature and pace of reform in the region and apparently oblivious to the role that US Middle East policy has had in maintaining deadlock in the Middle East peace process. The United States was simultaneously a revolutionary actor in pushing for and achieving regime change in Iraq from 2003 onward. President Obama inherited the cost from these missions in conjunction with the fallout from the 2008–2009 financial crisis and adjusted US policy accordingly. He instead focused on a military drawdown in Afghanistan and Iraq accompanied by diplomatic engagement with European allies, Russia, China, and Iran, which culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. A military and economic pivot to Asia, the latter through engagement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), was also made in an attempt to leverage 40 percent of the global economy toward US interests, not least in countering the rising power of China. Both the JCPOA and the TPP have been rolled back by the Trump administration, leaving a legacy

of US retrenchment in its wake. A largely discredited Deal of the Century (amid the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem) has been promoted by President Trump to end the Israel-Palestine conflict.

At the regional level, one need only look at the Arab Uprisings to see diversity in the drivers for reform, transition, or democracy and the state response in turn, partly due to different notions of statehood. Although state sovereignty is a relatively clear concept that demarcates the Arab states, Israel, Turkey, and Iran, Roger Owen notes that the state concept also implies a functioning set of institutions and practices, which include administrative, judicial, legislative, and coercive power. It can also vary from a regime or government, a regime masquerading as a state, or part of a binary definition such as state/society, all of which can be problematic. These states came into being in different historical circumstances than many other states around the world and have formed a different relationship with their citizens.⁴ There are a growing number of cases where the state system has deteriorated, particularly after the Arab Uprisings began in late 2010. We have come to talk more frequently about weak, fragile, and even failed states as a result.

The old order has disintegrated and gaps have emerged in a new regional order due to uncertainties surrounding governance and a new social contract. In this space, violent Islamist groups have prospered. While the Tunisian model in accommodating transition and power sharing has been exceptional thus far, there is also the Egyptian model of re-authoritarianism based on the heavy involvement of the military in state affairs, the Bahraini model of repression, the Syrian model of outright conflict, and the Algerian model of hitherto peaceful public-state negotiation. Oftentimes, these models are supported by Arab Gulf economic interventionism, particularly focused on Sunni monarchical regimes in Morocco and Jordan, but also pivotal regional and subregional actors such as Egypt and Sudan.

A Brief History of the Middle East

A history of contemporary Middle East politics need only go as far back as the emergence of Middle East states from the Ottoman and Persian Empires at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Oman is the exception, which by the eighteenth century had an empire that stretched to the east coast of Africa until Zanzibar became independent in 1964. Before decolonization and for approximately four hundred years, the Middle East was governed according to Ottoman practice and culture by rulers who owed their allegiance to Istanbul (including modern-day Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, northern Yemen,

Israel and Palestine, and around Tripoli and Benghazi in Libya). Ottoman reforms and an encroaching European presence led to some nationalist movements gaining a foothold, such as the Armenians in Anatolia and Maronite Christians of Mount Lebanon. The Balkan Wars signified a diminishing Ottoman capacity for control in Europe prior to 1914, when the First World War facilitated its demise.

After the war, the British and French divided territories into proto-states consisting of mandates and protectorates according to their imperial interests. Middle East states then gained independence in two waves. The first wave occurred between the two world wars and led to independence for Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Abulaziz Ibn Saud conquered much of the Arabian Peninsula and consolidated the tribal nation under a new kingdom in 1932. The Turkish War of Independence from 1919 to 1923 fought against proxies of Armenia, France, and Greece. The victory led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk caused the abolition of the Ottoman sultanate and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in October 1923. Iran was already independent under the Pahlavi Dynasty by 1925 and had enjoyed centuries of Persian Empire, including the Safavid Dynasty from 1501. Egypt was granted conditional independence by the British in 1922 and full independence from British control in the revolution led by the Free Officers Movement in 1952.

The second wave came during the period of decolonization following the end of the Second World War from the mid-1940s to the 1970s. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Syria gained independence from France, and Spain relinquished its territorial control over parts of Morocco. The UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Israel, and Jordan gained their independence from Britain. Aden, Algeria, and Libya were direct colonies of Britain, France, and Italy, respectively. Libya was occupied by allied forces and gained independence in 1947 while Aden became part of South Yemen in 1967, then Yemen during unification in 1990. The state system since the period of decolonization up to 2010 has proved relatively stable, due largely to great power intervention in favor of strongmen and the status quo.

Contemporary Issues and Challenges

Although a common Arab identity has built up over centuries and was used divisively but briefly in the pan-Arab rhetoric and actions of Egyptian president Gamal Nasser, there have been persistently poor efforts at regional integration. The reasons are many. There is competition, fragmentation, and regional competition that have resulted in an absence of regional security structure beyond the weak efforts of the Arab League.⁵ The result is a contemporary identity crisis, social trauma, and

democratic and capacity deficits that have disempowered society writ large and favored violent nonstate actors such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which disengage from any type of political engagement.⁶ Incidents such as the Iraq ferry disaster in March 2019 where 128 civilians drowned in the Mosul River highlight the lack of capacity in Middle East states. In this case, the Mosul River police had one broken boat, no ropes, no life jackets, and no training for such an eventuality.⁷

There is also a lack of integration in the global economy due in large part to protectionist trade policies that favor business elites engaged in a patron-client relationship. Middle East merchandise trade with the rest of the world actually dropped by 2.2 percent in 2017, the only region to experience a fall.⁸ There is also a lack of national competition that could benefit from economies of scale at the regional level. National governments generally want to keep control of hydrocarbon production rather than privatize, diversify, and enhance the role of the private sector. Rentier economies remain dominated by hydrocarbon revenues and high public expenditures (which are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain post 2014) while more diversified economies remain dependent on rentier states for economic benefits ranging from labor remittances to economic aid and investment.

If one were to envisage an imaginary train journey from Morocco to Turkey, it would involve traversing the sealed Morocco-Algeria border (closed in 1976, opened in 1988, and closed again in 1994). The border now includes barbed wire over 1,600 kilometers of shared border and on Algeria's other borders to fight transnational terrorism.⁹ The two states have clashed over the issue of the Western Sahara and in particular Algeria's support of the Polisario Front, the national liberation movement in a region where Morocco has declared its sovereignty.

From Algeria, the train would then head toward a conflict zone in Libya, where ISIS and other militia are active and thousands of refugees have set out to Italy across the Mediterranean often with disastrous consequences. At the time of writing Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, backed by Russia and Egypt, the UAE, and in part by France, has been wrong-footed by UN-backed Libyan forces having been able to gain control of al-Watiya airbase, south of Tripoli.

The train would then wend its way through northern Egypt, across the Suez Canal and into the Sinai Peninsula where government forces are actively engaged in a military operation against multiple armed groups, including Islamic State fighters. From there it would cross into Palestine through the Rafah crossing, which is only occasionally opened for humanitarian supplies to enter/exit Gaza. Should the Palestinian Economic

Plan launched by Jared Kushner become a reality, and a land connection built to link Gaza and the West Bank by train or road, one could envisage traveling to the West Bank and through northern Israel to the closed border of Lebanon. The alternative route might take you to the fortified border with Syria. Traveling any further through either of these countries would require a political solution on the Israel-Palestine conflict to include a normalization of relations and a ceasefire/end to the Syria conflict. The alternative might be the more circuitous route through Jordan and Iraq to the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing with Turkey. This simple exercise identifies at least five or six major security issues to overcome before a basic pan-regional infrastructure could be contemplated.

It shows unresolved political tensions that prohibit good neighborliness and the requisite cooperation for regional integration. It also shows that poorly managed conflicts and violent Islamist groups and militia of various descriptions are posing a persistent obstacle to state and national security. A renewed emphasis on good governance remains vital to normalizing economies that are focused on charting a route to broad-based growth and economic inclusion. However, continued inadequacy or failure of governance will lead to dissatisfaction and disaffection, especially among the youth, which will no doubt fuel further social unrest and risk upending the existing regional order. While authoritarian upgrading and re-authoritarianism is a common response, it is important to consider the long span of history and the relatively new state institutionalization processes at play as well as the ongoing potential for reform in the region.

One of the most persistent challenges has been great and regional power competition in the Middle East, leading to it being known as a penetrated region. US interests continue to favor an 'Israel first' policy, which puts any resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict into question. The conflicts in Libya and Syria in particular have morphed from civil wars into proxy battles for influence and the pursuit of diverse national interests, including acting as gateways for enhanced Russian influence in the region. The lack of restraint of state and nonstate actors continues to make political resolutions difficult to achieve, Yemen being the prime example.

At the regional level, the escalating tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have morphed into a dangerous standoff during the Trump presidency. The need for indigenous participation in dialogue and potentially a new regional security structure is clear to see. The Westphalia project at Cambridge University identifies that regional and external actors may have a role to play as guarantors to an agreement.¹⁰ But I argue that Saudi and Iranian de-escalation measures targeting their geo-sectarian conflict require broader measures. These include moving away from exclusively

theocratic principles for their political legitimacy, respecting minority groups, and contributing to socioeconomic resilience among internal and external groups most susceptible to a sectarian recruitment agenda.

Notes

1. See James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle That Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2012).
2. These include L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Change* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1984); Fawaz Gerges, *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955–1967* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994); Michael Hudson, ed., *The Middle East Dilemma: The Politics and Economics of Arab Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); F. Gregory Gause III, “Systemic Approaches to Middle East International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (1999): 11–31; Bassel Salloukh and Rex Brynen, eds., *Persistent Permeability? Regionalism, Localism, and Globalisation in the Middle East* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); and Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
3. See Roger Hardy, *The Poisoned Well: Empire and Its Legacy in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
4. Roger Owen, “Introduction,” in *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 1–4.
5. For more on this, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Amjad Rasheed, and Juline Beaujouan, “Transnational Language, Transient Identities, and the Crisis of the State in the Arab Region,” Project Narrative, <https://www.dur.ac.uk/owri/subprojects/transientidentities/>.
6. Ibid.
7. Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, “‘I’ve Seen Death in This City, but Nothing as Sad as This’: How a Ferry Disaster Exposed the Corruption Devastating Iraq,” *Guardian*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/05/mosul-iraq-ferry-disaster-corruption-protests>.
8. World Trade Organization, “World Trade Statistical Review 2018,” 10, https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/wts2018_e/wts2018_e.pdf.
9. The North Africa Post, “Algeria Seals Land Borders with Morocco,” November 29, 2018, <http://northafricapost.com/26507-algeria-seals-land-borders-with-morocco.html>.
10. Korber Foundation International Affairs, “A ‘Westphalia’ for the Middle East?,” 163RD Bergdorf Round Table, Berlin, November 11–13, 2016,

https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/bergedorfer-gespraechskreis/pdf/2017/Conference-Report_BG-163.pdf.

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