The Evolution of the Regional Security Complex in the MENA Region

Dr Christian Koch
Senior Advisor, Bussola Institute

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Emirates Diplomatic Academy
Hamdan Bin Mohammed Street
Al Hosn Palace District
P.O. Box 35567
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

http://eda.ac.ae/

research@eda.ac.ae

Dr Christian Koch

Senior Advisor, Bussola Institute

Dr Christian Koch is a Senior Advisor at the Bussola Institute in Brussels. His work focuses on the various international and foreign relations issues of the GCC states with a particular interest in GCC-EU Relations. Prior to his current assignment, Dr Koch served as Director of the Gulf Research Center (GRC) Foundation in Geneva, Switzerland.

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Executive Summary

- This EDA working paper looks at the geopolitical changes that have taken place in the MENA region over the past decade with an emphasis on the consequences for established actors and the new opportunities arising for new actors to establish themselves within the existing geopolitical spaces.

- Three factors can be identified as critical in terms of understanding the current transition:

  o The overall domestic volatility that has resulted in a combination of uprisings, revolutions and even civil wars impacting in one way or another virtually all states in the Middle East.

  o The growing concern among the Arab states of the MENA region of an expanding Iranian power especially through the use of non-state actors and proxy forces.

  o The changing role of the United States in the region and the return of great power competition with Russia's re-emergence through its intervention in Syria.

- All three factors outlined above – on the domestic, regional and international levels – come together to present a different picture of the MENA region than in recent history. A strong argument can be made for the fact that the power constellations in the Middle East and North Africa region are indeed witnessing a dramatic shift.

- A direct result of this shift is that Middle Eastern geopolitics has placed greater emphasis on the role of regional forces whose foreign and security policy now stands more in the forefront than at any other time in recent decades.

- In this context, the GCC states may be in the unique position to stamp their own impression on the direction of future shifts and outcomes.

- Within the changing parameters, some of the GCC states are placing increased emphasis on the terminology of stabilisation in a regional context and looking at options for a regional framework wherein regional as well as international actors can come together to bring about a more stable environment.

- Key components to be pursued in areas where instability and volatility remains high include:

  o ensuring the delivery of public services so as to maintain overall public support;

  o stabilising the economy both as a means to deliver on the service front but also to provide a basis for medium- to long-term stability;

  o and finally, establishing security on the ground so that the implementation of public service delivery and economic stability can be followed up on.

- In the future, efforts to set a new agenda for regional cooperation could see a move towards an Arab-led security architecture for the Middle East that is largely free from interference by outside actors. The ultimate goal, however, has to be an arrangement that also includes the non-Arab states of Turkey, Iran and Israel as well as the key international actors such as the United States, Russia, China and Europe.

1. Introduction

This chapter will look at the geopolitical changes that have taken place in the MENA region in the period since 2010 with a focus on the consequences for established actors and the opportunities for new actors to establish themselves within the existing, yet evolving, geopolitical space. The Middle Eastern strategic regional environment is undergoing a widespread transition with the ultimate outcome still unknown. Traditional external powers such as the United States or regional powers such as Egypt are adjusting their roles and changing their focus. Non-state actors have proliferated forcing established states into forging new policy responses. Moreover, new issues have emerged or taken on renewed urgency, such as the need for economic diversification and the rising concern over cyber security threats to name just a few, that are broadening the overall security agenda of the states in the region.

While this transition opens the space for regional actors to play a different and, one could argue, a more central role in determining their own affairs than has been the case in the past, the new emerging environment also requires greater adjustment and flexibility than was probably initially thought of. It certainly suggests a different, fluid and potentially more volatile environment that carries with it both opportunities and greater risks especially given the fact that any vacuums will be quickly filled by actors willing to take those risks. The evolving regional security complex is further accompanied by a breakdown in the general consensus of what the order should look like as well as competing and different conceptions of existing and emerging threats.[1] For some of those threats, no ready policy responses exist.

To make better sense of the implications of the evolution of the regional complex in the Middle East, this chapter will focus on three factors that can be identified as being particularly critical in terms of understanding the transition underpinning the current regional security environment. The first is the overall domestic volatility that has resulted in a combination of uprisings, revolutions and even civil wars impacting in one way or another virtually all states in the Middle East. The series of upheavals that erupted in late 2010 starting in Tunisia have swept through the entire region and have led regional actors to respond in a variety of ways. While some states took immediate action to prevent domestic uprisings or disturbances, others found themselves quickly at the mercy of an increasingly uncontrollable situation with state power being virtually eradicated and non-state actors rapidly filling corresponding vacuums. The starting point of any analysis on the changing regional security complex in the Middle East thus has to be the domestic level.

The second factor is more of a regional nature and involves the role of non-Arab states, especially Iran and Turkey. A primary concern for the Arab states of the MENA region in the past decade has been the issue of expanding Iranian power throughout the region at their expense, especially through the use of non-state actors and proxy forces. The greater influence that Iran is able to exert is the direct result of the fact that traditional power states such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq are for the moment no longer geostrategic players in the region. To some degree, the Arab Gulf states – primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE – have moved into

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1   On the regional security complex and its theoretical underpinnings see Buzan and Waever (2003).

the prevailing space, but their own domestic issues as well as overall state capacity has meant that gaps remain. In addition to Iran, Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyib Erdogan, has equally indicated a willingness and readiness to spread its influence into the Middle Eastern region from both an ideological as well as nationalist neo-Ottoman perspective. Yet, Iranian and Turkish incursions have not produced any stability in the Middle Eastern region. In fact, it can be argued that their policy prerogatives have been to prevent the region from returning to stability as Ankara and Tehran benefit from a certain degree of volatility in the Arab state system. In addition to Arab vs. Persian and Arab vs. Turkish ethnic rivalries, the regional dimension is also marked by increased sectarianism at the Sunni vs. Shia level which tends to frame regional competition in a "with-us-or-against-us" framework. At the onset of 2019, there is little to suggest that such competition will soon dissipate. The role of Israel must also be considered in this context as due to rising concerns about Turkish and Iranian ambitions, there has been a convergence among Arab states with Israel on common objectives. While the continued intransigence of the Israeli government over a resolution to the Palestinian issue prevents such convergence from transitioning into a new alliance mechanism, the outlook and direction of Israeli policy is naturally tied to considerations related to the broader regional and international dimension.

The third factor lies at the international level and involves the changing role of the United States in the region and the return of great power competition with Russia's re-emergence through its intervention in Syria. For US allies in the Middle East, there is a concrete fear that the US is not only recalibrating its policies toward the region but that, in fact, Washington has begun a more widespread withdrawal given the growing war fatigue back home and a shift of priorities to Asia where, as some have argued, the core strategic interests for the US are greater.[2] A direct result of this shift is that Middle Eastern geopolitics has placed greater emphasis on the role of regional forces whose foreign and security policy now stands more in the forefront than at any other time in recent decades. The more immediate impact has been an increase in regional tensions with the further possibility that those tensions could escalate into confrontations whether in direct form or through proxy forces as the previous determination of the US to prevent such escalations withers away. Combined with the domestic and regional factors mentioned earlier, a strong argument can be made for the fact that the power constellations in the Middle East region are indeed witnessing a dramatic shift. Equally relevant is the growing role of Russia as a factor with Moscow making a determined push not to be sidelined when it comes to the overall power game of international relations in the Middle East. The resulting shift to greater multi-polarity has created additional opportunities as well as challenges for regional states who find themselves engaged in balance-of-power efforts in one effort to enlarge their own strategic autonomy. A key question mark when it comes to external involvement in the Middle East hangs over the future role of China given its high economic and strategic dependency on Gulf oil resources and China's own determination to see its increasingly global interests being protected and advanced through a more proactive security policy. To be sure, China is poised to be more influential in the near future given the high stakes involved.

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2   Martin Indyk has made this point along with the suggestion that one of the most important interests the United States had in the Middle East, ensuring the free flow of oil from the Gulf at reasonable prices, is no longer a vital strategic one. See Feltman et al. (2019).

All three factors outlined above – on the domestic, regional and international levels – come together to present a different picture of the MENA region than existed during the Cold War or in years prior. The overarching transformation taking place has, in turn, a direct impact in terms of how stabilisation strategies for both short-term security and medium- to long-term development are conceived of and implemented by actors within the same domestic, regional and international context. The uncertainty about the role of traditional external actors such as the United States or individual European countries when it comes to outlining the contours of an emerging regional order, for example, forces regional states to step up to the plate and fill the vacuum with their own responses given both their own national interests and the fear that inaction will result in competing agendas dominating the future discourse. As such, the political context plays an even greater role especially given the stakes involved, i.e. the future regional order. The emphasis in stabilisation approaches tends to also shift to the more immediate impact of one's policies on the ground and away from the long-term focus on sustainability given the rapidly shifting local and regional realities.

Overall, it can be stated that the Middle East region is experiencing a multiple set of transitions (James Dorsey has referred to it being "enmeshed in a lengthy period of transition"[3]) that, for the moment, have not resolved themselves. As Vali Nasr has stated: "… today, the foundations of the region's political structure are in flux … this is a fundamental reorganization of power in the region in a manner that we actually don't know where the dust will settle."[4] As a result, there is an urgent need to find new mechanisms for order that would at least prevent further upheavals and widespread violence and allow for political space in which a new organising principle can be developed and ultimately agreed upon. Looking at the shifting regional security order, one aspect that is evident is that a few regional actors, led by some of the GCC states, are trying to re-establish a degree of stability in those areas defined by lawlessness, chaos and state decay in recent years. Those approaches are outlined in more detail toward the end of this chapter after a closer look at the three factors that has gotten the region to the point where it finds itself at present.

2. All Politics is Local

The speed with which the revolts of the Arab Uprisings spread throughout the region underlined the vulnerability and fragility of most of the existing ruling systems in the Middle East. To be sure, no state in the Middle East has been left untouched by the rising domestic volatility of the past decade. While protests and revolts in some countries resulted in actual changes in government (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen), in others the governments were forced to respond to mounting issues of contestation (Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, Iran and Morocco, for example). Even in countries that did not experience any clear outbreak of unrest (primarily Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), there was an immediate recognition that reform efforts, in particular at the economic level, needed to be undertaken with greater urgency.[5] In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, there was a shift in the local discourse away from the threat of the external

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3   See, Dorsey (2019).
4.   See "The Frontline Interview: Vali Nasr," February 20, 2018.
5.   In these countries, the governments responded with immediate economic packages that addressed issues of unemployment, housing and the rising cost of living. Public sector salaries for nationals, for example, were increased and additional public sector jobs were created for the region's large youth population. See Colombo (2012) as well as Ulrichsen (2018).

environment for domestic security and toward a greater emphasis on local and regional issues within which the security paradigm would be framed. On the one hand, the predominant concerns of the states in the region were to preserve the existing social and political structures as well as protect the existing compact between the ruling elite and the population at large. On the other, there was also a growing recognition that reform would have to be an essential part of the process of maintaining the status quo. This was due to the ongoing transition occurring at the broader social level where a younger generation, supported by better education opportunities and, even more important, greater connectivity, no longer felt bound to previous unspoken agreements and traditions that had existed in governing arrangements with the result that this generation began pushing for the rewriting of the existing social contract. With a determined push emerging from below, it became clear to many ruling authorities that in order to preserve some level of communal consent and legitimation of existing authority, domestic issues would have to be tackled head-on.[6]

Within the context of increased domestic political contestation, some of the states in the Middle East were able to respond better than others. Outside of Bahrain, the GCC states largely withstood the Arab Uprising's wave because of the ruling regimes' high degree of legitimacy and their ability to quickly respond to rising discontent levels and because they used the large financial resources at their disposal for the very visible transformation of their countries thereby further underscoring their legitimacy. Yet, even being in a comfortable economic situation has not prevented domestic issues from emerging, causing these countries to respond with a variety of reform efforts that are mostly encapsulated in so-called vision programmes such as Saudi Vision 2030 or the UAE Vision 2021.[7] Combined with the fact that much of the impetus for change and reform is because the GCC states have witnessed the emergence of a new generation of rulers, the outlook tends to be forward looking and pre-emptive. The question that remains for the GCC states in the current environment is how much change their societies can absorb in a short period of time before the change itself becomes a destabilising factor.

In contrast to the GCC states, the wider Middle East has also seen the emergence of the so-called "chaos states' marked by a complete breakdown of internal order and increased domestic fragmentation."[8] Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen are barely functioning with, in particular, the latter three countries experiencing power vacuums that have been filled by various non-state actors often with the support of other regional or external states. In turn, throughout much of the region political turmoil remains persistent as the initial transition that emerged out of the Arab Uprisings have failed to proceed in a linear, stable and expected fashion. As a result, the countries mentioned above will continue to be consumed by domestic conflict for many years to come, meaning that they will also be unable to project sufficient power outside of their territories. The proliferation of weak and shattered states has therefore changed the structural dynamics of the region's politics or as Marc Lynch has framed it: "The new order is fundamentally one of disorder." As regional states and external powers grapple with this new environment, the need for new policies and multi-pronged approaches has grown, underpinned by the realisation that preventing further domestic chaos is closely linked to better stabilisation

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6.   This was highlighted Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, the Prime Minister in the UAE who stated: "change or you will be changed eventually." See "The Region is not on my Agenda. It is my agenda", Newsweek, October 27, 2015.

7.   The Saudi Vision 2030 can be found at: https://vision2030.gov.sa/en while the UAE's Vision 2021 is available at: https://www.vision2021.ae/en. In fact, all the GCC states have issued their reform programmes under the headings of so-called Vision programme including Oman 2040 Vision (https://www.2040.om/en/national-priorities/), Kuwait Vision 2035, Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 (https://www.bahrain.bh/wps/wcm/connect/38f53f2f-9ad6-423d-9c96-2dbf17810c94/Vision%2B2030%2BEnglish%2B%28low%2Bresolution%29.pdf?MOD=AJPERES) and Qatar National Vision 2030 (https://www.mdps.gov.qa/en/qnv1/pages/default.aspx). All websites were accessed February 2, 2019.

8.   Peter Salisbury defines the chaos state as "Fragmented internally to the point they no longer exist as unified entities in reality and require highly sophisticated, multipronged policy responses." See Salisbury (2018).

policies within the greater region. It is this line of thinking that underpins what has been termed the activism of the GCC states' foreign policy, i.e., the determination to actively engage in regional affairs in order to be able to shape certain outcomes.[9]

The concern over domestic instability has, for example, directly led to the deep split among regional Middle Eastern actors about the rise of so-called political Islam as the organising principle for the future politics of the region. For the UAE and Saudi Arabia, for instance, any form of militant Islamism is seen as an existential threat whose imposition will result in permanent insecurity in the volatile region as a whole.[10] The role played by radical extremism has become a key driver of policies within states in the Middle East as well as the key regional foreign policy driver with new constellations of states forming around this growing divide not unlike the "Arab Cold War" that followed the rise of Nasserism but with a different alignment of players. Notwithstanding the normal caveats surrounding unique national situations, this issue has certainly exposed fissures that will need to be resolved if a stable regional order is to re-emerge.

The bottom line is that the new volatility exemplified by the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings brought the danger closer to home in the form of diverse threats no longer limited to state-to-state interactions. For most of the region, the volatility continues to persist as governments struggle to re-establish themselves and their legitimacy. As such, the potential for new revolts remains an ever-present reality. This is due to the fact that many of the issues that were seen as causes for the Arab uprisings – ranging from prevailing socio-economic disparities and the inability to promote sustainable development plans to questions over citizen dignity as well as the failure to construct coherent national identities – remain unresolved with few of the underlying causes having been addressed.[11] As Marc Lynch has aptly described it: "In almost every [Middle Eastern] country, the economic and political problems that drove the region towards popular uprising in 2011 are more intense today than they were seven years ago." As a result, he concludes that Arab regimes continue to be confronted with the "condition of profound perceived insecurity."[12] The Arab Uprisings were thus not so much about the birth of freedom but about the collapse of central authority with little to replace it.

Yet, the developments in the GCC states have underlined the fact that the current debate is also about active citizenship in which people contribute to the development of their society in the full sense. This does not mean that citizens are necessarily ready to challenge and overturn the system as it currently exists. As Sultan al-Qassimi stated: "Taxation in exchange for ensuring the security of citizens in an increasingly dangerous neighborhood might be the new accepted social contract."[13] On the other hand, the short-term path of stability chosen over accommodating social change underscores the current constant pressure on ruling legitimacy. With the youth becoming increasingly economically and socially empowered, governments are compelled to gradually open the spaces in which the new generation that is emerging can put the tools that they have been given through better access to education and closer links established through globalisation to optimal use. To their credit, the GCC governments see the emerging youth as a huge resource that must be fully integrated in the overall effort to secure continued stability and viability.

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9. There is much literature on this subject. See, for example, Young (2013) or Ragab and Colombo (2017).
10. Nael Sharma, "Commentary: Ambitious UAE Flexes Military Muscle," Reuters, August 27, 2018.
11. See, Khoury (2018). Or as Florence Gaub has stated: "All the principal factors which sparked the Arab Spring in 2011 [have] grown progressively worse." See, Gaub (2019, 37).
12. See, Lynch (2018).
13. See, Al-Qassemi (2016).

3. Iran, Turkey and the MENA Region

The second factor that must be examined in the context of regional security is the role being played by non-Arab regional states in the developments of the past decade. As already mentioned, the civil wars that have devastated the Middle East have created vacuums that have been filled by both regional as well as external actors. On the regional level, what the Middle East region has experienced as a result is a new tripartite competition between the Arab states, Turkey and Iran for power and influence. To some degree, this can also be classified as a competition between revisionist and status quo powers to determine the type of regional order that should emerge. The US-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 opened the door for Iran to break out of its isolation and once again propose itself as an alternative model for the rest of the region. Almost overnight, two key enemies of the Islamic Republic, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, were removed from power. While Iran took advantage and solidified its influence in the western parts of Afghanistan, its reach into Iraq was much more extensive, and Iranian-sponsored and supported groups soon began to dominate the domestic political scene in Iraq while American troops got increasingly dragged into a war of attrition that ultimately cost the US more than 4,000 lives and over a trillion dollars in economic losses.[14] It was in this context that former Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal said, "We fought a war together to keep Iran out of Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait … Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason."[15]

In 2011, the protests that erupted in Syria gave Iran an additional opportunity to come to the aid of its ally Bashar Al-Assad and through political and military support aid the Syrian regime. Ultimately, the Assad regime was able to prevail (also due to the Russian intervention discussed later) and Iran saw its position further strengthened inside Syria and in the region. The spread of Iranian influence in Arab affairs was, at the same time, seen as being detrimental to overall Middle Eastern stability as outside the Syrian case, Iran tended to support non-state actors like Hizbollah in Lebanon, militias like the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, and the Houthi in Yemen, actively undermining the stability of the given state in an effort to strengthen Tehran's own influence. In Lebanon, Hizbollah has taken the Lebanese state hostage and prevented the election of a President for more than 2 years from May 2014 until October 2016. Such examples, together with statements that reiterated Iran's intention to continue with the export of the Iranian revolution to the neighborhood and other statements by Iranian officials that more Arab states would soon fall under Iranian control, caused deep concern in much of the Arab world. Soon a determination was made by some Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, that a more substantive shift in policy was needed to curtail and push back on Iranian intentions. The overall assessment was that a continued wait-and-see approach would be too dangerous and that in addition to one's own domestic security, regional security would be endangered as well.

From Iran's perspective, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are seen as primarily leading the creation of an anti-Iran coalition with the support of the Trump administration and Israel that exaggerates the threat emanating from

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14. The military conflict from 2003 until 2011 is said to have cost $1.06 trillion and resulted in 4,423 casualties for the US military. See https://www.thebalance.com/cost-of-iraq-war-timeline-economic-impact-3306301 and https://dod.defense.gov/News/Casualty-Status/ (accessed February 2, 2019).
15. Saud Al-Faisal, "The Fight against Extremism and the Search for Peace," Remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations, September 20, 2005.

Tehran in terms of stability in the Middle East.[16] It is therefore its response to carefully cultivate a network of state and non-state regional allies that Teheran can deploy in the defense of its interests. Some have described this as a forward defense strategy.[17] In order to counter a perceived encirclement, Iran's emphasis is on asymmetric military capabilities and increasing the so-called strategic depth of the Islamic Republic. At the same time, with the consolidation of power by Recep Tayyib Erdogan in Turkey over the past decade, Turkey is aspiring to be "the only logical leader" of global Muslims and the dominant power in the Middle East.[18] In light of the announcement of the Trump administration in early January 2019 that the US would be withdrawing its troops from Syria, President Erdogan is said to have told President Trump that "It's our neighborhood" and as such there is no reason for the US to be there.[19] While Iran is often seen as overextended and struggling under the new sanctions, Turkey as a member of NATO sees itself as playing a more direct role in some Arab affairs especially as far as Syria and Iraq are concerned. A driving factor here is the Kurdish question with Turkey determined to quell any form of rising Kurdish nationalism and prevent the formation of a united front among Kurdish groups that would strengthen their case for independence and separate nationhood. Here, Turkey has similar interests to those of Iran and the majority of the Arab states. However, in terms of regional security, Turkey is not necessarily seen as a stabilising force by much of the Arab world. Its promotion of political Islam as an organising force as well as its transition from a parliamentary to a strong presidential system under President Erdogan tends to suggest that Ankara is more interested in seeing its own influence extended rather than promoting regional security. In that context, Turkey has emerged more as a competitor bidding for regional hegemony rather than a potential partner with whom Arab countries could work to re-establish security in the Middle East and contain Iranian ambitions. The lack of a regional order mechanism has, therefore, tended to push Turkey forward to try and achieve its own strategic ambitions at the expense of others in the broader Middle East.

What has occurred at the regional level in the past decade is an increased discrepancy between the simultaneous fragmentation and interconnectedness of the regional order. While territorial borders remain largely intact, national sovereignty as a concept has seen its maneuvering room curtailed.[20] Yet, what happens on the ground in one part of the Middle East is seen as having an impact on the security perceptions of all regional actors and as such the forces of disorder and interdependence must also be seen as going hand-in-hand. Furthermore, the created strategic spaces that have resulted from the increased turmoil have become the areas where increased competition between various regional forces is being played out. In that context, the regional security picture has become more complex than ever before.

4. The Changing Role of the United States

The third factor into the equation comes at the international level. For the past four decades, and some would argue even longer than that, the United States has played the pivotal role as an external actor in the Middle East. In particular, following the end of the Cold War and the US-led operation Desert Storm that evicted Iraq

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16. See Barzegar (2018).
17. Adnan Tabatabai, "Why Iran is not a Mideast Hegemon," Lobelog.com, February 6, 2018.
18. See Ibish (2019).
19. See, Wright (2018).
20. Galap Dalay, August 17, 2017.

from Kuwait in 1990, the US held the position of the hegemon of the region. While regional power dynamics remained stable in the two decades after the end of the Cold War, recent developments have transformed those dynamics. Here, in addition to the regional upheavals and revolutions discussed previously, the changing role of the US as the core security guarantor for Middle East allies is a key factor.

Three main issues can be identified as influencing the reorientation that the US has initiated following the developments of the past decade. First, there is widespread war fatigue following the long drawn-out and not very successful campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq following September 11, 2001. As it stands, the US public is simply not willing to commit large amounts of resources for foreign campaigns in which the American public sees little substantive progress or results being made.

Second, a reorientation is taking place toward other areas of engagement which indicates that the Middle East is slowly losing the vital national security classification that it once held within US strategic thinking. Coupled with the development of shale oil and the increased energy independence of the US, the emphasis on protecting the free flow of energy from the Gulf region is no longer considered a vital strategic interest by planners in Washington. Instead, the increased power competition with Russia and China in the Asian theater is being given higher degrees of attention. As Martin Indyk argues, the perceptions of a US withdrawal and retrenchment from the Middle East can as a result be deemed as accurate.[21] Or, as the former US ambassador in the region Jeffrey Feltman has stated: "The region is still important, but not as critically important to us as it was ten or fifteen or twenty years ago."[22] Kuwaiti commentator Abdullah Al-Shayeji has referred to "a non-committed, wavering, fatigued US" when it comes to its regional Middle East policy.[23] There seems to be a growing US hesitation on further engagement in a region that has not led to expected returns and an increased preference to stay in the background when it comes to the daily developments on the ground. As an alternative, political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have pleaded for a policy of "off-shore balancing" as a way to keep US interests protected.[24]

Third, it is felt that a shift in capabilities is needed that caters for the move away from specifically large-scale military engagement to a more diverse and technologically driven hybrid form of warfare. Part of this is related to the war weariness mentioned previously as rising death tolls have an immediate impact on domestic political sentiment. Modern forms of warfare now allow for greater distance to the actual battlefield as well as place the emphasis on battlefield containment rather than having actual boots on the ground. Thus, while a vital national security interest of the US is the elimination of terrorism and the prevention of another attack on the US homeland, military planners see such an objective being largely accomplished through drone attacks on militant groups abroad coupled with surveillance technology and immigration procedures that protect US borders and prevent infiltration. However, in terms of developments in the Middle East, those capabilities are not suitable to determine the outcome in places such as Syria, Libya or Yemen. Instead, what has become clear both during the Obama administration and the Trump administration is the increased emphasis from the US side that in such cases regional allies should have their forces on the ground

21. See, Feltman et al. (2019, 5).
22. Quoted in Wright, "The Shrinking US Footprint in the Middle East.".
23. Quoted in Victor Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies," in Almezaini and Rickly (2017, 39).
24. See, Mearsheimer and Walt (2016, 70-83).

with the US playing merely a supporting role. It is in line with this view that President Trump has favored the establishment of the Middle East Strategic Alliance or asked Saudi Arabia for a $4 billion contribution to the stabilisation of Syria.[25] The overall consensus in Washington is that America's allies have, at least until recently, relied too much on the US to solve regional problems and need to make a greater contribution to resolving the problems at hand.

With domestic issues being in the forefront and foreign policy decisions being made on the basis of domestic priorities, there is an increasingly restricted room to maneuver as far as the US administration is concerned. The Arab Uprisings forced the Obama administration to confront a familiar US policy dilemma but one of unprecedented magnitude, scope and complexity: determining whether and how, in each case, to support Arab popular aspirations while at the same time protecting America's strategic interests. Overall, President Obama embraced a gradualist approach to democratic change, marked by an emphasis on universal rights, rule of law, institutional reform, economic development, and poverty alleviation. This was due to Obama's views about the US role in world affairs and his thinking about the limits of American power and influence. Obama's policies subsequently manifested themselves in a decided preference for region-based solutions, multilateral action, "low visibility" American leadership, and cautious incrementalism. Strategic considerations remained, including cooperation on counterterrorism, reliable access to oil, countering Iran, and ensuring Israel's national security. But these were radically tempered by an approach that sought to get away from the neo-conservative push for interventionism under Obama's predecessor. In Libya, for example, one witnessed a clear determination within the US policy community to let others take the lead. All of this has a direct consequence, as Robert Malley, the President of the International Crisis Group, outlined at the start of 2019. He stated:

> "As the era of largely uncontested US primacy fades, the international order has been thrown into turmoil. More leaders are tempted more often to test limits, jostle for power, and seek to bolster their influence – or diminish that of their rivals – by meddling in foreign conflicts. Multilateralism and its constraints are under siege, challenged by more transactional, zero-sum politics … The danger of today's free-for-all goes beyond the violence already generated. The larger risk is of miscalculation. Overreach by one leader convinced of his immunity may prompt an unexpected reaction by another; the ensuing tit for tat easily could escalate without the presence of a credible, willing outside power able to play the role of arbiter."[26]

For US allies in the region, especially the GCC states, the changing US role in the Middle East brings them face to face with certain dilemmas. Most importantly, in terms of their own security, they continue to see the US as the only power militarily capable of protecting their territorial sovereignty and reversing situations like the invasion by Saddam Hussein of Kuwait in 1990. Up until recently, the common view held has been that when Arab states needed outside support, the US stood ready to provide such support.[27] With recent action and policy statements, such support can no longer be seen as a given. A key question being asked in the region

25. "Trump Asked for $4 Billion from Saudis for Syria," Stars & Stripes, March 16, 2018. See also, "Trump Seeks to Revive 'Arab NATO' to Confront Iran," Reuters, July 27, 2018. Ray Takeyh of the Council of Foreign Relations characterised the speech by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered in Cairo on January 10, 2019 as being largely about burden-sharing. See https://www.cfr.org/article/middle-east-burden-sharing (accessed February 3, 2019).

26. See, Malley (2018).

27. See Ross Harrison, "Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: A Historical Perspective," Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, September 2, 2018, 4 available under http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html (accessed January 19, 2019).

is whether the US is still both willing and able to provide in particular its regional Gulf allies those capacities which they themselves lack but which are essential for their own survival and security. Marc Lynch has argued that "the Arab regimes no longer see the United States as a reliable guarantor of regime survival or their foreign policy interests." He concludes that the US simply "no longer has the power or the standing to impose a regional order on its own terms."[28] The UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr Anwar Gargash also stressed his belief that the UAE can no longer rely solely on its Western allies but he has tied this assessment to the case that the Arab states themselves need to invest in their capabilities as a result. He stated in July 2018: "In this current international system, it is no longer 'write a cheque and someone is going to come and secure the stability in the region.' You have to do some of the burden-sharing."[29] One direct consequence therefore is that US allies in the Middle East have either built up or are putting together a level of capabilities that allows them to act in a more independent fashion and not rely as much on the US as has been the case in the past.

Another aspect is that the previous era of US unipolarity failed to offer any alternative to the existing regional order. Regional US allies have also been forced to re-examine their overall regional and international positions as a reaction to the changed circumstances. As Cafiero and Shakespeare have argued: "In light of the financial crisis of 2008 and the uncertainty of US foreign policy during Donald Trump's presidency, Gulf Arab States are increasingly determined to counter-balance their dependence on Washington as a security guarantor by broadening their diplomatic relationships."[30] Issues such as the debate on the so-called pivot to Asia have been highly disconcerting for the Gulf region even though such a debate should also be seen in the context of a move away from the interventionist policies of the previous decade. For the GCC states, however, recent developments have underlined the critical need for building different partnerships for the maintenance of regional security. While in regional terms this means establishing a new balance in relations with powers such as Iran, Turkey and Israel, on the international level, countries such as Russia, China and India are beginning to play a more central role in overall policy deliberations. Given the fact that regional actors are beginning to have to confront theaters such as Syria without necessarily having the right tools to determine developments on the ground, the need to show that one can talk to others and that there is no longer an exclusive dependence on the US when it comes to their own security is an important element in the new strategic thinking being found among US Arab allies. In that context, it must be asked if indeed the first two years of the Trump administration represent a high point in relations between the Arab Gulf states and Washington. One commentator recently referred to the current situation as that of a "mutual sobering" where both sides do not see the other as investing enough resources and the Arab Gulf states, in particular, increasingly hedging against an unpredictable United States.[31] And while the main line of argument has been that the reorientation away from the Middle East occurred under the Obama administration, there is little to suggest that such re-orientation is not also continuing under the Trump administration.[32]

28. Lynch, "The New Arab Order."
29. "UAE Ready to Take on Greater Security Burden in Middle East: Minister," Reuters, July 26, 2018.
30. Giorgio Cafiero and Victoria Shakespeare, "Oman's Port Strategy," Lobelog.com, August 31, 2018.
31. See, Guzansky (2018).
32. The withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represents another dilemma for the GCC states. President Obama did not see the Iran–Saudi rivalry as being necessarily a zero-sum game. Moreover, as has been pointed out, "the willingness of the United States to play a leading role could have made a difference in terms of countering Iran in the region." Yet, the withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement also has put the reliability of the US as a party to international agreements into question. See, Feltman et al. (2019, 16–17).

Another direct consequence of the American policy reorientation has been the re-emergence of Russia as a power player on the Middle East chessboard, first in Syria but later also across other theaters. With the US unwilling to enforce stated red lines as a great ambivalence began to gather that questioned overall US interventionist policy, a strategic opening was presented to Moscow that it quickly capitalised on. In Syria, Russia was able to reassert itself in the Middle East without much US objection. While the US did continue to assert itself as a player on the ground, it did so almost exclusively under the premise of fighting the Islamic State (Daesh) and not in terms of guiding regional developments towards the emergence of a new regional security mechanism. In this context, the decision by the US in early January 2019 to withdraw its forces from Syria has further benefited Moscow. The decision has forced Syrian Kurds from once again seeking an alliance with the Assad regime due to fears about a potential Turkish invasion against them, an alliance that Moscow favors, and it has left Moscow as the only force in Syria that could potentially restrain Syria as well as serve as a bulwark against Ankara. Russia's policies have been noticed by US Arab allies. King Salman's landmark visit to Russia in October 2017 as well as the signing of a declaration of strategic partnership between the UAE and Russia in June 2018 underscores the readiness to engage with Russia as a strategic factor in regional affairs.[33] As such, it has been argued that "Russian-Gulf Arab relations may be better than at any time in the past."[34] In similar vein, an approach has also been made toward China. While China is currently not a strategic actor as far as the Middle East is concerned, there is a growing consensus in the region that Beijing is poised to become a more influential actor especially if the US umbrella for ensuring the free flow of energy from the Gulf region begins to be drawn in. Here again, the UAE and China have agreed to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership,[35] while Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Oman have all strengthened their bilateral ties with Beijing. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, China seeks to establish a firm foothold covering the regions of the Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Horn of Africa and the Sea.

The changing external involvement in Middle East strategic affairs is the third pillar impacting the regional security complex. The age of US unipolarity is coming to an end and being replaced by a return to great power politics and greater multipolarity. America's Middle East allies are adjusting to the new realities by diversifying their own foreign relationships and positioning themselves within the emerging framework. While the new environment makes the search for new regional order mechanisms more complex, it also opens a space for regional actors to see their own policy prerogatives being included in the overall debate. As such, the impetus for further regional activism when it comes to Middle East developments will remain a key element in future alignments.

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33. "UAE, Russia Forge Strategic Partnership," Gulf News, June 1, 2018.
34. See, Katz (2019).
35. "UAE and China Declare Deep Strategic Partnership as State Visit Ends," The National, July 21, 2018. For a more in-depth analysis, see Janardhan (2018).

5. Conclusion

The regional security environment in the Middle East is in transition — to some degree it is in fact up for grabs. Some of the vacuum created by the decline of state control and a less unilateral international order has been filled by violent non-state actors that operate in a different space. Yet, the shift also opens the space for regional actors who with determined leadership as well as institutional capabilities can have an impact on the direction of the transition that is taking place. No doubt, the changing regional scene carries with it both opportunities and risks. The combination of the breakdown of regional consensus and US reorientation can be classified as a sea change. On the one hand, it takes away the obstacles to regional integration (i.e., the US umbrella) while, on the other, it prevents integration due to the rising lack of prevailing consensus over the future direction of the Middle East as a whole. While the era of US dominance was one of greater simplicity, the involvement of a number of traditional as well as newly emerging factors introduces new complexities to an already difficult search for order. The GCC states may be in the unique position to stamp their own impression on the direction of future shifts and outcomes. While the event around the Arab Uprising have had a profound impact on their domestic developments, the GCC states have emerged as functioning and stable states that can respond to the challenges with which they are presented. On a regional level, the GCC states are starting to take initiatives on many fronts within the context of promoting a new security paradigm, taking the Arabian Peninsula as a whole as their point of departure when referring to regional security.[36] And internationally, the GCC states are forging new partnerships that broaden their strategic choices while still emphasising the relevance of the United States and key European states to achieving stability within the Middle East region.

Within the changing parameters, some of the GCC states are placing increased emphasis on the terminology of stabilisation in a regional context and looking at options for a regional framework wherein regional as well as international actors can come together to bring about a more stable environment. Key components to be pursued in areas where instability and volatility remains high include ensuring the delivery of public services so as to maintain overall public support; stabilising the economy both as a means to deliver on the service front but also to provide a basis for medium- to long-term stability; and finally, establishing security on the ground so that the implementation of public service delivery and economic stability can be followed up on. There is an awareness that stabilisation measures must achieve progress in all three areas simultaneously and that all of them are interconnected. As the state is essential for the provision of security, a high degree of trust by the population in the state is a needed element for relevant security measures to be effectively implemented. That trust is grounded in the provision of public services which in turn operate efficiently in a well-structured and functioning economy. One key aspect of the approach on the regional level is centered on the provision of humanitarian assistance and development aid.[37] Such approach, however, again has stability as a prerequisite for a successful implementation process.

36. The concept of a new regional security paradigm was the subject of a seminar held at the Bussola Institute in Brussels on October 24, 2018. For more information, see https://www.bussolainstitute.org/news/1007/ (accessed February 3, 2019).
37. See, Salisbury (2018).

In the future, efforts to set a new agenda for regional cooperation could see a move toward an Arab-led security architecture for the Middle East that is largely free from interference by outside actors. A key battleground in this context lies in the Levant region especially in Iraq given that Syria is likely to need decades in order for the semblance of a state to re-emerge that could reassert its role at a regional level. An emphasis on Iraqi national interests, Arab character and its ties to the Arab world is increasingly seen as critical when it comes to the overall security of the Middle East. Yet, Syria will also remain critical. The re-engagement of the GCC states with Syria, including the re-opening of embassies by the UAE and Kuwait as well as the re-admission of Syria into the Arab League as of early 2019, is a clear recognition that isolating the Assad regime and keeping one's distance from Damascus is not conducive to moving the region to greater stability. The ultimate goal, however, has to be an arrangement that also includes the non-Arab states of Turkey, Iran and Israel as well as the key international actors such as the United States, Russia, China and Europe. A good starting point could be going back to the speech that former Saudi foreign minister Saud Al-Faisal delivered at the inaugural Manama Dialogue in 2004. Arguing for a framework structured around sub-national, regional, and international inter-dependent components, the foreign minister called for "meaningful political, economic, social and educational reforms and not merely cosmetic changes", "a regional security framework that includes all the countries of the region" and "international guarantees … provided by the collective will of the international community through a unanimous declaration by the Security Council …"[38] Given the interlocking transitions occurring at the domestic, regional and international levels in the Middle East security environment at the moment, these views put forward by Saud Al-Faisal would be worthwhile re-visiting once again.

38. "Towards a New Framework for Regional Security," Statement by HRH Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Arabia, The Gulf Dialogue, Manama, December 5, 2004.

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