

Regional Powers in a Transforming Middle East

Meliha Benli Altunışık

Middle East Technical University

The Middle East region has been characterized by the presence of several regional powers, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Israel, competing for power and influence. Except for short periods, the most notable being Egypt from the 1950s to mid-1960s, no one regional power has been able to assume the regional leadership role. This situation is mainly the result of the fact that each of these countries either does not possess all the attributes of a regional power, or does not have clear superiority over others with regard to those attributes. In the literature, regional powers are defined not only by their power capabilities, hard and soft, but also with respect to their willingness to act as a regional power and, more significantly, their acceptance in the region. None of the regional powers in the Middle East has possessed all these attributes for long enough to emerge as the hegemonic power in the region. Thus, the powers compete with each other either to protect and enhance their positions or to prevent any other regional power from becoming a regional hegemon. This competition becomes intense particularly in moments of transitions and transformations, such as the Gulf War of 1990-91, Iraq War of 2003, and the "Arab Spring", as they provide both new opportunities and challenges.

There are other characteristics of the Middle East region that affect the fate of regional power competition.

First, the Middle East is a region that is highly penetrated by external powers. In particular, the US has been the dominant external power since the end of WWII. At times, for instance especially after its invasion of Iraq in 2003 until its withdrawal in 2009-2011, the US even became a regional power. Since the end of WWII the US has identified more or less unchanged interests in the region and heavily engaged in the Middle East to protect those interests. A corollary of this objective for the US has been to prevent any one regional power from imposing its hegemony on the region, even if this power is a US ally, since such domination would have put constraints on exercising US power. Although the general threads of US policy have remained the same throughout the years, there were differences in terms of strategies. For instance, the recent evolution of US policy under the Obama Administration which led to the debates even about the possibility of US disengagement from the region clearly have had repercussions for competition among the regional powers.

Second, the fluid boundaries of the region have consequences for the competition among the regional powers and their acceptance in the region. The region consists of an Arab core and three non-Arab countries that happen to be among the regional powers. Although the Arab world itself is generally fragmented, it is still difficult for a non-Arab state to take the leadership role in the region except perhaps for short periods.

Third, the presence of region-wide influential non-state actors also acts as a factor to limit the influence of the regional powers. The PLO, especially after the 1967 War, Hamas, Hezbollah, and various Kurdish nationalist movements can be seen as typical examples. ISIS, even if it calls itself a state, is a recent example where a non-state actor decreases the power of states. Fourth, ideologies and ideational issues that resonate regionally are widely used in the competition between the regional powers. Arab nationalism, Salafism, Kurdish nationalism and sectarianism are examples of such ideologies and identities that have been used by the regional powers to enhance their influence. However, such factors have also been limiting for some regional actors. For instance, Arab nationalism enhanced Egypt's regional influence under Nasser, while at the same time limiting the influence not only of non-Arab regional powers but also Saudi Arabia, which was identified as the enemy of Arab nationalism. Similarly, especially since the 2003 War, sectarianism has been used both to enhance and limit the influence of rival regional powers.

Fifth, the intense competition between the regional powers in the Middle East allows room for manoeuvre for secondary powers like Syria or Qatar to have an influence far beyond their power capabilities. In the post-2003 era, Qatar, through the use of money and media, emerged as an influential power by mediating conflicts. Syria also used opportunities to be influential after the Gulf War of 1990-1991 far beyond its power capabilities.

Sixth, there are no effective regional institutions in the Middle East to mitigate the conflicts between the regional powers. The existing regional organizations like the Arab League and the GCC are largely ineffective but also do not have region-wide membership.

Regional politics in the post-Gulf War era

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the subsequent war against Iraq by the US-led coalition created possibilities for regional powers to reposition themselves in the evolving regional order. Faced with unipolarity and thus increasing US presence in the region, the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, and the weakening of a major Arab player (Iraq), three Arab countries, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria, announced the Damascus Declaration in March 1991, which aimed to develop a common position and to cooperate in creating a new Arab regional order. Such cooperation was seen as useful to Egypt for its "return" to the Middle East after being isolated for more than a decade due to the Camp David Accords. Syria, a former member of the anti-US camp, approached such cooperation as its acceptance in the new

regional order under the shadow of a unipolar world. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, aimed to expand and consolidate its influence in the new era. Although the Damascus Declaration helped these countries to individually achieve their objectives, it failed to garner a new regional order with these countries at its core. The professed objectives of the declaration notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia, the GCC and Egypt began to rely even more on the US for their security.

Another important characteristic of regional politics in the immediate post-Second Gulf War era was the increasing inclusion of non-Arab regional countries into regional politics. Israel, which already had a peace treaty with Egypt, was in a peace process with its Arab antagonists that also led to normalization of relations between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. Iran was also agreeable as its relations with its main remaining Arab antagonist, Saudi Arabia, had been changing in a more positive direction. This trend continued in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War, despite the limitations imposed by the US dual containment policy. Iran even took the presidency of the Organization of Islamic the Conference (OIC) in 1997, an organization where Saudi Arabia has clout. Turkey's position, on the other hand, was rather different because Turkey's relations with its main Arab antagonist, Syria, continued to be problematic. Thus, although Turkey was part of regional politics due to its policies towards Syria, its participation in the US-led Iraq policy and military incursions into northern Iraq, as well as its alignment with Israel in the mid-1990s, its acceptance by the regional actors was rather low.

Regional politics in the post-Iraq War of 2003

Regional politics underwent yet another important wave of changes due to the impact of the September 11 attacks on the US and the following US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The invasion represented the highest point of unipolar interventionism in the region and made a strong impact on regional politics. Yet, the Bush administration's attempts to create a new Middle East order met with resistance and also had unintended consequences. The US witnessed the limits of US power in Iraq, in the victory of Hamas in Palestine, in Hezbollah's re-emergence as the most important actor in Lebanese politics, and in the rise of Iran's influence all over the Middle East. More interestingly, US allies also used the opportunities to develop policies that were challenging US positions. Turkey's policy of developing close ties with Syria despite at times very public protests by the Bush administration is a clear example.

In the post-Iraq War period, regional politics became characterized by a "regional Cold War" between the GCC, Jordan, Egypt, Israel and the US on the one hand, and those that resisted their policies and vision, namely Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, on the other. Although differences of opinion existed between each camp, a shared regional vision brought them together. The first group aimed to limit the influence of Iran as well as what they perceive as radical groups in the region. The second group rejected what they perceive as the US and

Israeli hegemony that aimed to reshape the Middle East according to their interests. Iraq and Lebanon became a battleground for the competition between these actors. A related development in the region was the emergence of sectarian politics on a regional scale.

This period witnessed the rising influence of the non-Arab powers in the Middle East. Among them, Israel was able to establish an implicit link with the positions of the Arab regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan in their effort to limit the influence of Iran and its allies in the region. Iran, on the other hand, became more influential in the region due to its strengthened links with important Arab actors, its hard power capabilities and especially by championing the Palestinian cause in the early 2000s. The position of the third non-Arab actor with rising influence, Turkey, was rather peculiar. At the time of the regional Cold War, Turkey opted to stay away from these camps, claiming to have good relations with both. Post-2003 Middle East struggles coincided with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which, for political, economic and ideational reasons, was ready to play a more active role in regional politics. The AKP also differentiated its perspective and policies from other regional powers and focused more on soft power, engaged in mediation activities, and emphasized economic interdependence in its relations with the region.

Regional politics in the post-Arab Spring era

The domestic upheavals that started in Tunisia and spread to some other Arab countries soon became part of regional politics. The regional powers, mainly Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, engaged in an intense effort to protect or rather enhance their positions in this new environment. For each of these powers the transformations that were taking place presented both opportunities and challenges. Saudi Arabia was initially disturbed by the spread of “people power” and started to work to control the developments in critical Arab countries like Egypt and Yemen while engaging in efforts to prevent the spread of the “Arab Spring” to the GCC, even by sending forces to Bahrain in order to suppress the uprising there. With the toppling of Morsi from power by a military coup, implementing a controlled transition in Yemen and suppressing the uprising in Bahrain, Riyadh seemed to effectively deal with these threats. The developments in Syria, on the other hand, were considered as an opportunity by Saudi Arabia to limit Iran’s influence in the Arab world. Yet the fact that the opposition could not topple the Assad regime imposed important limitations on Saudi influence in the region.

For Iran, the post-Arab Spring region has also presented a mixed bag. The toppling of Mubarak provided an opportunity for normalization of relations with Egypt, and yet Iran’s relations with Hamas have weakened and Tehran could not do much when the Bahraini uprising was suppressed. Iran has been successful in preventing the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, but at the same time has lost much of its soft power in the Arab street, which led to framing Iran as a “Shi’ite power” for that reason. Furthermore, for Iran, sustaining its policy in Syria, which relies on a regime with a limited base, became difficult and costly.

FOCUS article

Turkey, which was expected to enhance its influence further in the region as a result of the toppling of regimes and holding of popular elections, began to face significant challenges to its regional power status. The overthrowing of Morsi in Egypt and harsh criticism of the coup by the AKP government undermined Turkey-Egypt relations. The developments in Syria exposed the limitations of Turkey's leverage in that country as it failed to achieve its objective of toppling the Assad regime despite all its efforts. To make matters worse, Ankara is forced to experience the consequences of the instability in Syria, more significantly in the form of soaring refugee numbers (about 2 million) and its implications for the Kurdish problem in Turkey. Turkey's popularity in the region decreased considerably and it was increasingly being seen as a "Sunni power," thus becoming party to regional fragmentation. Finally, its policies in the Syrian crisis put Turkey at odds with Iran, Iraq and even Saudi Arabia, as well as international backers of the Assad regime, such as Russia. Its policies also began to increasingly diverge with its allies. Turkey's criticisms of the al-Sisi regime in Egypt led to a crisis in Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Thus, Turkey became quite isolated in the region.

The rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) since last summer further complicates this picture as it provides new kinds of challenges but also opportunities. This non-state actor claims to establish a state that is threatening the territorial integrity of Syria and Iraq, spreading radicalism, engaging in atrocities, and making more and more people refugees and internally displaced. Thus, the repercussions of all these developments for regional politics are enormous. As such, the rise of ISIS represents a common threat to both regional countries and major extra-regional powers, and thus presents a unique opportunity for cooperation between them, even the ones that have been at odds for a long time, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. This seems to be the logic behind the US-led coalition that was formed in Riyadh. However, despite the appearance of cooperation in the face of a common threat, the regional actors are still locked in a zero-sum game where they are concerned about the possibility of one of them gaining more as a result of the war against ISIS. This new development is also a test for regional countries to (re)define their relations with the US, as well as for the US to test its new engagement with the region. In such an environment, the regional powers are faced with a historically very significant moment as they are not locked in a usual game of protecting and/or enhancing their powers but confronting a critical moment when the entire geopolitics of the region may change.