

“New” regional order in the Middle East: plus ça change?

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Throughout the Western world, media outlets and think tanks resonate with predictions of a new international order, or alternatively a new world “disorder”. We are told how the fast-changing geopolitical terrain with its new balance of power, both material and normative, is fast eroding the old “rules based” or “liberal international order”. The context may be different today, but the language recalls that of the “coming anarchy” predicted by Robert Kaplan in 1994. Much of this analysis rests upon an understanding of a decline of US power and legitimacy, a weakening of international institutions designed and dominated by Western powers, and the “rise” of alternative centers of power comprising states, competing institutions, and actors with different perceptions of order and the mechanisms underpinning it. For some, these changes present a welcome opportunity for a global reset; for others they are a source of fear and uncertainty.

The Middle East is close to the heart of such discussions. If a new world order is indeed emerging, the Middle East is part of that transformation. It is a geopolitically significant region that has itself experienced particularly rapid changes over the past few decades, including those brought sharply into relief since the onset of the Gaza War, which started in response to the Hamas attacks on Israel in October 2023. That war and its outcome, which has reduced the immediate threat from Israel’s principal enemies, notably the Resistance Axis (Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and Shi’ite groups in Yemen and Syria) and contributed to the fall of the Syrian regime, has revised assumptions about the shifting regional power balance. It has strengthened the negotiating position of core states like Turkey and Egypt, while reaffirming the authority of those Arab Gulf states, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whose influence on regional order has been growing steadily over recent decades. Indeed, beyond Gaza and its ongoing fallout, the region has been fast transforming in terms of its capabilities and distribution of power which has seen the rise and fall of different states (notably those most affected by the Arab Uprisings), and by a far more assertive response to global questions than characterised the Cold War or immediate post-Cold War period, where the

¹ This essay draws on Fawcett 2025 forthcoming.

shadow of the Western world predominated in regional affairs. Regional states have greater agency: they are revisionist powers, part of a rising Global South, who no longer readily cede to former allies, and choose from a large menu of alliance partners. The Saudi hosting of the recent Russia-US talks on Ukraine (or China's previous hosting of the Saudi-Iran talks) is an example of its global reach. Perhaps the same could be said of other world regions – that they are experiencing high levels of change as part of a larger global reset - but the difference in the Middle East is the deeply entangled relationship between regional and global order.

This regional-global entanglement is no new phenomenon. The interdependence between Middle Eastern and global order is demonstrated time and again across its turbulent history since interdependence, whether through its enduring geopolitical significance – drawing on Mackinder's (1904) "Heartland" theory, or its economic weight – notably where vital energy resources like oil and gas are concerned. Despite global efforts to reduce fossil fuel dependence, the latter remains hugely important, more so following the Ukraine War, and the sanctions regime imposed on Russia, giving Middle East oil states – not for the first time - an important bargaining chip. It has been described as the "most penetrated" subsystem (Brown 1984), revealing how external powers have repeatedly intervened to promote their own regional interests and contrasting visions of regional order, making the regional and global dimensions hard to separate. This penetration dates from the late Ottoman period, through to the establishment of independent states under colonial tutelage, early Cold War competition for allies, and multiple post-Cold War conflicts right to the present. Middle East wars have been regularly "globalized", spilling over their borders and drawing in an array of external powers and institutions, thereby impacting the international security architecture. The current conflict in Gaza, which has engaged and divided world opinion, is a case in point, but there are many more, including the longer history of the Arab-Israel conflict, the Lebanese Civil War, the Iranian Revolution, the Iraq War, or the events around the Arab Uprisings, which saw extensive meddling by non-regional states, most notably in Libya and Syria. If world order is changing the Middle East is at the center, even a bellwether of such changes - a "laboratory of contemporary world politics" (Brownlee and Ghiabi 2025, xxvi).

Beyond the unfolding drama of the latest confrontation between Hamas and Israel, however, how robust are claims of a brand "new" Middle Eastern order, and does the current conjuncture really qualify as a turning point or "critical juncture" (Pierson 2004, 10) as some claim? At one level, events on the ground are changing fast, making robust predictions hard.

At another, the conflict in Gaza which has returned the “Question of Palestine” back to center stage, arguably builds on events since at least the start of the twenty-first century, if not before. These include the “War on Terror” that followed 9/11; the Iraq War; the Arab Uprisings and their multiple consequences, all of which set in train processes that radically reshaped the regional balance of power away from a core of republican states (some of whose regimes were victims of the Arab Uprisings) and towards the monarchies of the Arab Gulf, Israel, Turkey, and Iran. Iran’s empowerment, for example, owed much to the effects of the Iraq War, just as its new vulnerability may be attributed to the effects of the Gaza and Ukraine Wars on its key allies.

This essay critically reprises Middle East “order” and its meanings, and its interdependent relationship with global order over time. The following section scrutinizes these much-used (or abused) terms and their appropriateness. What do we mean by order, who defines it, and for which purpose; what is the Middle East today - the provocative title of a new book by Marc Lynch (2025); and how relevant is the traditional description of the region in thinking about possible orders, when the region has evidently broken away from its post-colonial moorings? A final section reviews the history of some past “reordering” moments and locates recent developments in the region within these, sorting out the new from the old. It argues that many of the features today described as new have long roots; that new Middle East orders have been regularly predicted but not always emerged, at least not in the anticipated form. Remember when US President George H.W. Bush promised a “New World Order” (Bush 1991), one with a Middle East peace settlement at its heart? By looking at those histories and reprising the state of the region today in the light of changes that have occurred since the start of this century, it proposes a more balanced, decentred view of order, placing Middle East change in context and within a wider framework of changing global order.

What is order and what is the Middle East?

What do we mean when we talk about “order” and “Middle East” order? On international order, as International Relations (IR) scholars explain, we search for some predictable and durable patterns in relations between states via a balance of power mechanism or shared norms and institutions, the latter providing evidence of an “international society” (Hurrell 2007). An order, like the Cold War bipolar order, was a power balancing arrangement; the scope for multilateral collaboration was narrowed, though still existent – in arms control

treaties, for example. The post-Cold War “unipolar” order, for a brief period at least, offered the promise of a far more ambitious global template for order around the twin projects of economic and political liberalization. But that order was short and never fully realized. Both these two orders look unfamiliar today, despite predictions of a “new Cold War” between the US and China and elements of unipolarity in the transactional, “America first” approach of the US President Trump. International order looks messier, more fragmented, less predictable, and engages a much larger range of actors in what many describe as a “multipolar” world.

The same holds for Middle East order. In fact, when it comes to the Middle East, one immediate observation might be that ordering patterns have always been more elusive, and elements of an international society hard to locate. The Middle East did not escape the effects of the Cold War; it engaged with the effects of globalization but also obeyed its own internal dynamics and logics. Indeed, “disorder” appears to be a more appropriate term to describe much of its history (Maloney 2025). These arguments have foundations but draw upon essentializing notions of the region as being beyond order or condemned to perpetual anarchy – a popular post-Arab Spring refrain, accompanied by predictions of the downfall of the “artificial” Arab State (Ahram and Lust, 2016). As discussed below, they rely upon a particular interpretation of order and the Middle East itself: by searching for order only “where the light shines” as Lisa Anderson (2006) claimed in reference to efforts to study Middle East democratization using Western political science methods. They similarly neglect or ignore periods of relative stability in relations between Arab and non-Arab states – for example when Arab republican states after independence upheld a consensus around anti-colonialism, Arab norms, and hostility to Israel. And how, at different points in the region’s recent history, putative new orders have emerged – post-Iranian revolution, for example, when Arab states (and their Western allies) sought to balance the Iran threat; in the 1990s; during the Middle East Peace Process with its promise of a comprehensive new regional order; or after the Iraq War, when a fragile and still tentative regional architecture emerged around two loose alliance systems, notably the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance” and a bloc of more “moderate”, US aligned Arab regimes. The latter system, with some adjustments, was further reinforced by the effects of the Arab Uprisings (Fawcett 2023), and remains in place today, even as Iran’s allies have been seriously weakened by Israel’s campaigns against Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis. Despite ruptures and fragmentation, order is not absent in the Middle East, and there are significant continuities across orders. However, measured

by the standards of durability, predictability, and institutional stickiness in inter-state relations as defined by IR scholars, the Middle East falls short; it is characterized by an absence of regularised ordering patterns and weak institutions, making it harder to pinpoint critical points in the creation of new orders.

Tracking orders historically and identifying new ordering moments and their legacies is one way to avoid simplifying notions about “new orders.” The issue is compounded by the unit of analysis used: the Middle East. Is the Middle East region as often conceived – the 22 members of the League of Arab States plus Iran, Israel, and Turkey – really an appropriate one in terms of looking for predictable ordering patterns? Are we asking the right questions and looking in the right places, as Anderson (2006) suggests? This colonial or post-colonial regional framing is not one easily associated with coherent ordering patterns, given its criss-crossing sub-regional and transregional dynamics. Critical scholars, like Pinar Bilgin (2019), have suggested alternative formulations which could work better in terms of trying to find regular ordering features in the Middle East – an Islamic Middle East, an Arab, or Mediterranean Middle East, for example, rather than relying on maps designed by colonial powers. Yet even these alternative designations arguably fail to capture the degree of fluidity and mobility of the contemporary region, characterized by multiple criss-crossing alliances (Del Sarto and Soler i Lecha 2024; Darwich 2021). The “Middle East” has burst out of its post-colonial boundaries and reaches into Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian Ocean, and beyond (Fawcett 2023; Lynch 2022). Looking at its emerging alliance patterns and behaviors reveals how this is no longer the Middle East once imagined by the West (Bilgin 2019). Hence, neither familiar concepts of “order” nor the “Middle East” offer a particularly useful set of tools to appraise the contemporary Middle East, reminding us how IR theories and (post)imperial geographies, or “geo-epistemologies”, continue to restrict rather than promote understanding (Barkawi et al. 2024).

New orders, past and present

Against this framing, let us briefly consider some prior ordering moments in Middle East history and place them in context. It is supposed that the Gaza War and the success of Israel’s campaigns, leading to significant reductions in the material capacity of its principal enemies, notably the Resistance Axis, and the linked demise of the Assad regime, have created the possibilities of a “New Order,” one still reliant on US power and supported by regional brokers like the Arab Gulf States and Turkey. Underlying that order are also the

earlier backchannel negotiations between Israel and certain Arab states - that built on previous peace agreements with first Egypt and then Jordan - and culminated in the 2020 Abraham Accords. The Trump administration has reaffirmed President Biden's "iron-clad" support for Israel; his alignment with Gulf Arab states continues, though they disagree with his extravagant Gaza plans.

Any notion of a brand-new order, however appealing, needs qualifying. It recalls recent and recurring debates about new orders. Soon after US President Bush outlined his "New World Order" after the 1991 Gulf War (Bush 1991), Israel's Shimon Peres also spoke of a "New Middle East" following the Oslo Accords in 1993. Though the Oslo Accords are remembered with some nostalgia today, they failed (Shlaim 2019). The failure of that order was underlined by the killing of one of the Oslo architects and the escalation in terrorist attacks against mostly Western targets, of which 9/11 was the most dramatic example. The Afghan War and the Iraq War were both results of the War on Terror and the perceived need to contain "rogue" states. It is easy to forget how, in the febrile environment of the early 2000s, and with the Palestine question effectively side-lined, another new regional order was promised, the result of another bold US attempt to reshape the region via state rebuilding in Iraq. Indeed, Iraq was to become a model state for that new regional order. The Iraq War failed disastrously, however, unleashing a series of destructive events whose consequences for the region are still unfolding. Entangled among those were the Arab Uprisings, not in their origins, but in the unleashing of jihadi movements and sectarian divides whose effects continue to reverberate – leading to the weakening or near collapse of certain Arab states and strengthening of others. In the post-2011 period, the region experienced levels of disruption hardly matched in its history as previously "strong states", like Egypt, witnessed domestic protest, regime change, or rupture as competing groups and external powers sought control.

No sooner had some of the effects of the Arab Uprisings started to subside, with some new patterns and relationships pointing to a tentative new order or balance of power around the two principal regional adversaries and their allies (Israel and Iran), than the Hamas attacks on Israel, followed swiftly and decisively by the overwhelming power and reach of Israel's response seemed to establish Israel as the predominant regional power. Relatedly and surprisingly, the recent rehabilitation of Assad's Syria, was quickly reversed by the crumbling of the Axis, as its supporters were either diminished by their own wars (Hamas and Hezbollah) or drained of allied resources (Russia).

Conclusion: plus ça change?

This brings us back to the present and the need to carefully adjudicate these changes to determine whether a new order is in sight. Is this really a “critical juncture”, an event, or series of events that create constraints and opportunities for action, setting actors on new pathways, where “self-reinforcing processes make reversals very difficult” (Pierson 2004, 10; Fawcett 2017)? While some scholars believe that this could be a turning point both for the Middle East and global order (Gerges et al. 2024), this essay concludes on a more cautionary note. The present conjuncture, which is precisely a combination of ongoing geopolitical shifts and dramatic regional developments sparked by the Gaza War, presents a fresh panorama but also draws on a set of past events, precedents, and pathways. It resists quick conclusions. This is not to deny the size and scale of some of the changes that have taken place, but it seeks to place them in both geopolitical and historical context. Rather than assuming we are at the dawn of another new world order, we should take stock, look back, and consider the elements of continuity as well as change.

Time will tell, and the second administration of Donald Trump has certainly offered one alternative vision, at least of what might happen in Gaza, making it, in his words, a kind of “Riviera” of the region, recalling a status once awarded to Lebanon as the “Switzerland of the Middle East.” Such thinking appears fantastical. Certainly, the Middle East is set on a different track than that predicted just a few years ago, but those predictions, like many previous ones, were never robust. Another, and possibly more likely, scenario is that continuity in many arenas will prevail over radical changes. And some of those changes have been in the offing for a while. US power, legitimacy, and reach is certainly diminished, but this process started long before the current conflict; the Palestine question has returned to center stage, but not for the first time. Perhaps the power of the now depleted “Iran axis,” contrary to alarmist predictions, was always over-hyped to illustrate and justify the “balance of threat” argument in theory and practice. And its power is diminished but not destroyed. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, singly and collectively, have long been significant regional actors and engaged in back-channel negotiations with Israel well before the Abraham Accords. Turkey is on the rise, but again, that’s not unprecedented, given its previous roles as an aspiring peace broker or mediator amid regional conflicts. Assad’s rapid demise was unexpected, to be sure, and will inform the new regional balance of power,

though Syria's future remains highly uncertain. But we shouldn't forget what happened after Saddam Hussein's ignominious fall and how events in Iraq, facilitated by the disastrous US-led intervention, produced unforeseen consequences and fed directly into the movements around the Arab Uprisings, whose consequences are still unfolding. And the growing empowerment of Israel, post-Iraq War and post-Arab Uprisings with its robust US guarantees is nothing new, even if it has been facilitated by the horrors of war.

What is clear is that the "New Middle East" today is a much more mobile and fluid construction which defies easy description. Certainly, it cannot be characterized only by "broken" or "artificial" states and failed institutions. There are weak and contested states with still porous borders, but the region contains major powers, some of whom are already acting as veto players in world politics and multilateral institutions. Thinking about the behavior of leading Arab states in the Ukraine War and the Saudi hosting of US-Russia talks is just one case in point; the Gaza War could still prove to be another. In a recent development, the League of Arab States, often described as a fossilized institution, has laid down its alternative reconstruction plan for Gaza, showing that Arab institutions embodying Arab norms, today as in the past, still have a role to play in a changing Middle East order (Matthiesen 2024).

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