

The Iraq War 20 years on: towards a new regional architecture

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To speak of a new regional architecture or order in Middle East beyond the Iraq War requires evidence of significant changes—a move from old to new alliances, relationships and patterns of behaviour.¹ It does not require that architecture to be entirely stable or unified, but implies that any return to a prior order, like that of the Cold War or early post-Cold War period, is unlikely, if not impossible. As this article argues, even as the region continues to show volatility in the face of multiple challenges, there have been significant, irreversible changes linked directly to the consequences of the Iraq War. As simply stated by the British Iraq Inquiry in 2016: ‘The consequences of the invasion and of the conflict within Iraq which followed are still being felt in Iraq and the wider Middle East.’² They are also visible in the shifting international alignments in a region now involving, albeit unequally, three major powers—the United States, Russia and China; in its balance of power, dominated by the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, to which other actors are obliged to accommodate themselves; and in its regional institutions, all of which show marked changes and new orientations.

At the level of international alignments, this was recently demonstrated by the war in Ukraine, with even staunchly pro-western Arab states declining to criticize the Russian invasion or respond to demands to increase oil supplies to meet shortfalls arising from sanctions on Russia. Other states, such as Iran, have moved closer to Russia. Similarly, in the COVID–19 pandemic, the region’s fast-growing international connections were evidenced by increased reliance on both China and Russia for vital support and supplies in what has been called ‘vaccine diplomacy’,³ showing how the region had shifted from earlier dependence on the West. These more recent events, however, derive from new positions, policies and alignments adopted during and after the experience of the Iraq War, whose highly destabilizing effects saw rapid changes to the regional balance of power and a resultant need

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¹ The terms are closely related: ‘regional architecture’ refers to the region’s security arrangements, alliances and institutions; ‘regional order’ to more patterned and regularized relationships between regional states. See Andrew Hurrell, *On global order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 2–3.

² *Report of the Iraq Inquiry: executive summary* (Kingston: Canbury Press, 2017), p. 4. For the full inquiry see The Iraq Inquiry, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 16 Jan. 2023.)

³ Louise Fawcett, ‘The Middle East and COVID-19: time for collective action’, *Globalization and Health* 17: 133, 2021, pp. 2–3.

to diversify alliances and institutional frameworks. Apart from the Iranian–Saudi rivalry, another later-to-emerge development was the new Arab–Israeli alignment reflected in the 2020 Abraham Accords. Yet another is the extensive networks and connections that Middle East states are building with their hinterlands, in Central Asia and Eurasia, the Indian Ocean region and sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, the very notion of a territorially bounded ‘Middle East’, as imagined by colonial and postcolonial policy-makers, makes little sense today.⁴

This article offers a fresh perspective on the effects of the Iraq War after two decades, arguing that it has contributed decisively to the construction of a new regional order. This is not a wholly new claim: since the war started, and its consequences unfolded, scholars have referred to its seminal effects on the geopolitics of the region and wider world.⁵ However, the effort to analyse these has been overshadowed by the rapid pace of subsequent developments: the Arab uprisings, the extension of sectarian violence (including the rise and fall of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)), and the refugee and humanitarian crises have all commanded new attention. To emphasize the consequences of the Iraq War is not to diminish the significance of these events, but to highlight how they are linked back to the war which helped to trigger processes of change in ways that remain under-acknowledged. With the benefit of twenty years’ hindsight, and extending this journal’s analysis of the first postwar decade, it is time to re-evaluate the conflict’s enduring significance for the region.⁶

This long view matters, first, as it has clear policy resonance, in terms of the justification and conduct of war and peacemaking—lessons not lost on subsequent leaders. As the Iraq Inquiry candidly stated: ‘When the invasion began, the UK government was not in a position to conclude that satisfactory plans had been drawn up and preparations made to meet known post-conflict challenges and risks in Iraq and to mitigate the risk of strategic failure.’⁷ Retrospective US analyses came later, notably a two-volume report by the US Army, but while these were somewhat blander, similar points emerge.⁸ Second, from an academic perspective, it throws light on still underexplored aspects of the international relations of the Middle East by reflecting on the central importance of choices made by local actors and institutions, as well as the imperatives of great power politics.

The article starts with a discussion to provide historical and geopolitical context for the evolving nature of regional order, and reviews some previous literature on the Iraq War. It then introduces the term ‘critical juncture’ as a heuristic device through which to examine processes of change. The following sections of the

⁴ Pinar Bilgin, ‘Whose Middle East? Geopolitical inventions and practices of security’, *International Relations* 18: 1, 2004, pp. 25–41; Marc Lynch, ‘The end of the Middle East: how an old map distorts a new reality’, *Foreign Affairs* 101: 2, 2022, pp. 58–66.

⁵ Bassel Salloukh, ‘The Arab uprisings and the geopolitics of the Middle East’, *International Spectator* 48: 2 2013, pp. 32–46; Raymond Hinnebusch, ‘The US invasion of Iraq: explanations and implications’, *Middle East Critique* 16: 3, 2007, pp. 209–28.

⁶ Special issue, ‘The Middle East ten years after the invasion of Iraq’, *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013.

⁷ *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, p. 100.

⁸ For an overview, see Jon Finer, ‘The last war—and the next? Learning the wrong lessons from Iraq’, *Foreign Affairs* 98: 4, 2019, pp. 183–91.

article examine those processes at three interrelated levels, arguing that in each case a set of changes have occurred that has set the region on new pathways. The first relates to geopolitical or international system effects: notably, how international actors have repositioned themselves in the light of the Iraq War, particularly in response to declining unipolarity. The second is the regional dimension. Beyond the geopolitical shifts it occasioned, the destruction and reconstitution of Iraq, hitherto a key regional state, has had a major impact on the regional balance of power, reflected in the changing landscape of regional powers and alliances. The third is the institutional aspect, specifically, how changes in the region's security arrangements have been reflected in its regional institutions and with what effects.

Aside from the international and regional repercussions explored here, many countries in the Middle East, notably Iraq itself, and those that later became the main sites of the Arab uprisings and wars that followed, experienced unprecedented domestic turbulence, challenging not only the prevailing political order but the very boundaries and territorial integrity of states (the rise of ISIS providing a powerful example). The extent of disruption to Iraq itself has been compounded by new ethno-sectarian divides and major demographic shifts that have changed the very nature of Iraqi nationhood.⁹ While this article does not consider in detail the effects of the Iraq War on the politics of individual states, it highlights the close interdependence between local, regional and international politics in determining the war's outcomes, highlighting the centrality of domestic political considerations in the foreign policy behaviours of states.¹⁰ It is worth underlining, however, that the Iraq War, for all its intentions, did not produce a new direction in the region's domestic politics. Instead, by threatening state fracture and sectarianism, a pattern repeated over the course of the Arab uprisings, it helped rather to reinforce already existing authoritarian, or 'counter-revolutionary', tendencies of major Middle East states.¹¹

The Iraq War was not the only factor in determining the changes described here: other geopolitical and regional factors were also at work. Certain elements of the new patterns of behaviour described were already visible before the war—the growing empowerment and confidence of certain regional states, for example, with oil proving a particularly potent weapon. And postwar events, notably the onset of the Arab uprisings, and their consequences, were also critical in reinforcing processes of change, alongside a reduced US appetite for intervention and the greater involvement of other powers, notably Russia and China. All these were part of a wider ongoing shift from unipolarity to greater multipolarity in the region and the wider world.¹² Still, from the Middle East perspective, the war was a pivotal point in setting the region on a new path. Just as there can be no

⁹ Oula Kadhum, 'Nation-destroying, emigration and Iraqi nationhood after the 2003 intervention', *International Affairs* 99: 2, 2023, pp. 587–604.

¹⁰ May Darwich and Juliet Kaarbo, 'IR in the Middle East: foreign policy analysis in theoretical approaches', *International Relations* 43: 2, 2019, pp. 225–45.

¹¹ Steven Heydemann, 'Explaining the Arab uprisings: transformations in comparative perspective', *Mediterranean Politics* 21: 1, 2016, pp. 192–204.

¹² Mehran Kamrava, 'Accessing the multipolarity and instability in the Middle East', *Orbis* 62: 4, 2018, pp. 598–616.

return to the ‘old’ Iraq, there can be no return to the old regional order, and the Iraq War had a decisive role to play in ensuring this.

Regional order in context

Understanding the Iraq War and its importance in regional and international politics requires an awareness of historical context. If the regional order has shifted, what was the prior order? In discussing the nature of Middle East order there are different, sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping, explanations on offer, drawing on different International Relations (IR) theories and approaches. Terms like ‘subordinate’ international system, and regional security system or ‘complex’, are used to identify how systemic features interact with local environments.¹³ In the Middle East, systemic arguments are inescapable: it has been famously described as the most penetrated subsystem,¹⁴ revealing how external powers have constantly intervened to promote their regional interests and visions of regional order. Still, in respect of the need better to understand and accommodate regional particularities, including the history of its political and security arrangements, and also of its different cultures and peoples, scholars agree on the importance of engaging not only domestic-level approaches, but also those informed by the politics of identity.¹⁵ Critical scholars go further in highlighting the need to incorporate transnational Arabist or Islamic perspectives in understanding the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), an element that mainstream IR approaches fail to capture.¹⁶ This was something the proponents of the Iraq War patently failed to grasp, helping to validate critiques of western policies as ‘orientalist’.¹⁷ There was little understanding of the make-up of Iraqi society, its mix of different religious and ethnic minorities, and how these might be affected by the clumsy politics of regime change and top-down democratization, which displaced longstanding Sunni dominance and generated widespread sectarian violence.¹⁸ This lack of regional sensitivity has a long history and is directly connected to the very construction of the state system by colonial powers. It is at least partly responsible for the growth of jihadism, the rise of ISIS, and the prolonged wave of sectarian and interstate conflict that followed the Iraq War and continues to inform regional politics.

While it is impossible to characterize the Middle East in simplifying terms—and there are those who criticize the artificiality of the territorially bounded region as currently defined—there were nonetheless certain parameters estab-

¹³ Leonard Binder, ‘The Middle East as a subordinate international system’, *World Politics* 20: 3, 1958, pp. 408–29; F. Gregory Gause, ‘Systemic approaches to Middle East international relations’, *International Studies Review* 1: 1, 1999, pp. 11–31; Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and powers: the structure of international security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ L. Carl Brown, *International politics and the Middle East: old rules, dangerous game* (London: Tauris, 1984).

¹⁵ For a fresh interpretation see Ewan Stein, *International relations in the Middle East: hegemonic strategies and regional order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁶ Pinar Bilgin, *Regional security in the Middle East: a critical perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁷ See Jasmine Gani, ‘From discourse to practice: Orientalism, western policy and the Arab uprisings’, *International Affairs* 98: 1, 2022, pp. 45–65.

¹⁸ Kadhum, ‘Nation-destroying, emigration and Iraqi nationhood’.

lished in the period after independence which constituted a regularized, recognizable pattern of relationships amid established regional hierarchies. These included a consensus around the norms of anti-colonialism and, among Arab states at least, Arab nationalism,¹⁹ loosely reflected in the League of Arab States (LAS), a regional institution founded in 1945, and in hostility to the State of Israel after its creation in 1948. Regional hierarchies were part of a power balance sustained by the wider Cold War framework, in which certain states, such as Egypt, Iran and Turkey, alongside the emerging rentier states of the Gulf, played important roles, but in which US power was dominant. The USSR, in turn, provided backing to the Arab republics—Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria. This consensus and power balance had started to shift before the end of the Cold War: Egypt and later Jordan, with strong US support, signed peace treaties with Israel, disrupting the Arab order. Iran had a social revolution in 1979, which deeply unsettled the region but failed, ultimately, to pull other countries in its wake.

Beyond the Cold War's ending, continuing levels of external interference, sitting atop entrenched regional dynamics, meant that this event, for the Middle East, was less dramatic than for other regions.²⁰ There was little post-Cold War 'dividend' in terms of peace or democracy. What followed were multiple challenges to regional order posed by the fallout from the Iranian Revolution, the Iran–Iraq War and first Gulf War, the rise and fall of the Middle East peace process (MEPP), and the emergence of extremist Islamic movements, culminating in the events of 9/11 and beyond—but none of these, arguably, set the region comprehensively on a new path in the way that the Iraq War eventually would do. While the Iranian Revolution of 1978–9 was a crucial turning point in US–Iran relations, triggering the massive military commitment that made the Iraq War possible,²¹ it did not produce a definitive shift in interregional dynamics: Arab states had previously balanced against Iran, and continued to do so, albeit on a different axis. Despite the hostile reactions it provoked, post-revolutionary Iran was, in its first decades, a relatively weak state fighting a long war with its neighbour Iraq, and its revolutionary message was contained. For Iran, it was 2003 that provided a decisive turning-point for its regional ambitions.²²

The 1991 Gulf War, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, was an important event in paving the way for the 2003 war and in empowering Iraq's Kurds, for example, but it did not significantly reduce Iraq's regional pretensions or US interventionism; nor, at that time, did it represent a significant gain for other regional or international powers. In fact, it was followed by the most sustained US effort to date to direct a comprehensive regional peace process—to which many Arab states subscribed—which occupied much of the decade. In sharp distinction to the 2003 war, however, that of 1991 was endorsed by the UN Security Council, and therefore perceived as legitimate, though a good number of Arab

¹⁹ Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim, *The Cold War and the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²¹ Louise Fawcett and Andrew Payne, 'Stuck on a hostile path: US policy towards Iran since the revolution', *Contemporary Politics*, 2 Feb. 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569775.2022.2029239>.

²² Salloukh, 'The Arab uprisings and the geopolitics of the Middle East', pp. 32–3.

states opposed it, as the close LAS vote (12/21) revealed. It also occurred at a time when US unipolarity was nearing its apogee and relatively uncontested. This, however, all changed after the war of 2003—one never endorsed by the UN, nor indeed by the great majority of states inside and outside the region, who from the start contested its legitimacy, with important consequences for US hegemony and reputation in the Middle East and beyond. China and Russia, as discussed below, distanced themselves from the war, but so did US allies including key European states, though the European response was divided—in turn revealing fractures in the western alliance. Of course, these outcomes and their longer-term effects were not immediately apparent; it took a decade or more for the evidence from the war to become clearer, by which time other issues had intervened, making it hard to untangle different events and their sequence.

It is instructive to review the abovementioned issue of *International Affairs* of March 2013—a retrospective on the Middle East region ten years after the Iraq War.²³ The 12 articles covering nearly 250 pages in this leading IR journal are testament to its seminal importance in the international relations of the Middle East. They made an important contemporary contribution, joining a large literature on the arguments for and, increasingly, against that intervention, viewed from a variety of perspectives, which aligns with the analysis of this article and the work of other scholars who have highlighted the deeply disruptive effects of the war.²⁴ Though preceding the findings of the Iraq Inquiry, some of its results were clearly anticipated, as critiques of the war mounted and its cost, in human, material and regional security terms, became clear. The findings of these articles have held up well in confirming the nature and extent of changes wrought by the US-led intervention, from the article by Toby Dodge on regime change in Iraq, leading to a ‘competitive authoritarianism’,²⁵ to that by Fawaz Gerges on President Obama’s approach representing the ‘end of America’s moment’ in the Middle East and paving the way for a vacuum in global leadership.²⁶ Similarly insightful are Philip Robins’s examination of the complex implications of the war for Turkey’s emerging foreign policy as a regional power,²⁷ and Gareth Stansfield’s exposé of how the war presaged the unravelling of the post-First World War state system, with a spotlight on the Kurdistan region as heralding ‘paradigmatic’ changes.²⁸ As with other earlier works on the war,²⁹ subsequent events have necessarily overtaken or amended some of these findings, not least the continuation of what in 2013—the so-called Arab Spring—was a process still in its early

²³ Special issue, ‘The Middle East ten years after the invasion of Iraq’.

²⁴ See Hinnebusch, ‘The US invasion of Iraq’.

²⁵ Toby Dodge, ‘State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new authoritarianism’, *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013, p. 245.

²⁶ Fawaz Gerges, ‘The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America’s moment?’, *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013, p. 321.

²⁷ Philip Robins, ‘Turkey’s “double gravity” predicament: the foreign policy of a newly activist power’, *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013, pp. 381–97.

²⁸ Gareth Stansfield, ‘The unravelling of the post-First World War state system? The Kurdistan region of Iraq and the transformation of the Middle East’, *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013, p. 282.

²⁹ See e.g. Rick Fawn and Raymond Hinnebusch, *The Iraq War: causes and consequences* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006).

stages. Yet their main conclusions largely hold and, as this article claims, the Iraq War remains ever present in the unfolding of later events—the dramatic rise of ISIS, for example. The survival of President Assad’s regime in Syria, with Iranian and Russian support, amid a bloody civil war drawing in a large cast of actors, reflects and affirms the importance of the new regional balance of power, albeit one in which Syria’s own role, like Iraq’s previously, is greatly diminished.³⁰ It also demonstrates, alongside the reduced western appetite for intervention, the increased presence and reach of Russia in the region. The ongoing war in Yemen, again, exposes the new competitive regional environment in which the Saudi–Iranian rivalry predominates. More generally, both Russia and China, as well as major powers such as India, have become far more important actors in the region, not displacing the United States, but embracing new allies and economic openings, with the Iraq War proving decisive in presenting economic and security opportunities on which to build.³¹ Taken together, such events serve to confirm rather than challenge the claim that the Iraq War and its consequences did indeed constitute a point of no return for the region in terms of regional order and international relations.³²

The Iraq War as critical juncture

The term ‘critical juncture’ is widely employed in both policy discourse and political science scholarship. In so describing the Iraq War, this article draws on the literature of historical institutionalism, which employs concepts such as path dependence and critical junctures to explain patterns of institutional continuity and change.³³ Institutions here refer to enduring collections of rules and practices that regulate behaviour, for example in regional orders. A critical juncture is an event, or iterated series of events—in this case the Iraq War and its consequences—which creates constraints and opportunities for action, setting actors on new pathways, where ‘self-reinforcing processes make reversals very difficult’.³⁴ Importantly, critical junctures, unlike ‘shocks’, are quite rare and punctuate longer periods of relative stasis where path dependence becomes embedded in actors’ actions and choices. While historical institutionalism has been less used in IR than other areas of political science, it works well in certain settings, for example in looking at the end of the Cold War as a critical juncture for international order and institutions, or the phenomenon of global terrorism as leading to revised security priorities.³⁵ Recently an argument has been made that the COVID–19 pandemic

³⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli, *The war for Syria: regional and international dimensions of the Syrian uprising* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

³¹ Valeria Talbot and Ugo Tramballi, *Looking west: the rise of Asia in the Middle East* (Milan: Ledizione, 2020).

³² See Louise Fawcett, ‘The Iraq War ten years on: assessing the fall-out’, *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013, pp. 325–43.

³³ Giovanni Capocchia and Dan Kelemen, ‘The study of critical junctures: theory, narrative and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism’, *World Politics* 59: 3, 2007, pp. 341–69.

³⁴ Paul Pierson, *Politics in time: history, institutions, and social analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 10.

³⁵ Etel Solingen and Wilfred Wan, ‘Critical junctures, developmental pathways and incremental change in security institutions’, in Orfeo Fioretos, Tulia Falletti and Adam Sheingate, eds, *Oxford handbook of historical institu-*

has had similarly transformative effects on international order, though it may still be too early to judge the long-term effects of that event on global security priorities, particularly given the coincidence of a new European war in Ukraine.³⁶

Adopting this interpretation, which focuses on major processes of change flowing from an event or a sequence of events, this article argues that the Iraq War and its consequences set states and other actors on new pathways, making a return to the *status quo ante* impossible. By looking at the international, regional and institutional arenas, and identifying key features of change as they relate to the Middle East, it brings historical institutionalism into conversation with a levels of analysis schema. The Iraq War, marking the decline of US unipolarity and the rise of a more multipolar international system, together with the accompanying regional and institutional changes described here, helps to place the twenty-first-century Middle East in a fresh context. In setting the region on new pathways, it throws doubt on the concept of the 'Middle East' as traditionally defined. This is not to imply that the pre-2003 Middle East existed in a steady state—the Middle East is a region that has been regularly punctuated by crises or shocks.³⁷ Nor is it to imply that there has been any linear or stable pattern to post-Iraq War events; nor to argue that states, non-state actors and institutions responded in the same way or at the same time. This would be impossible given the iterated series of events that followed and the continuing volatility of regional order. Critical junctures do not create stasis; rather, they change existing parameters and establish new pathways, producing some observable and more regular patterns;³⁸ these, in the Iraq War case, can be readily identified in respect of regional ordering and international alignments. The next section of the article examines this claim across three levels.

International implications

The first level examined here is the international one, from which arguably all other changes flowed. IR scholarship is frequently criticized for its top-down, overly 'systemic' perspective, focusing on the agency of major states, which can occlude the effects of local influences and actors, but in this case such a perspective is inescapable. In contrast with other major regional events which had strong local as well as international origins (the Arab–Israel wars, Lebanon's wars, the Iranian Revolution or the Iran–Iraq War, for example), this was a top-down decision: a war that 'did not need to happen and certainly not when it did',³⁹ and one opposed by multiple regional and international actors. The US decision to go to war and remake the Iraqi state, and to refashion the Middle East, was critical in facilitating new international alignments, changing perceptions of US power, and opening

tionalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 553–71.

³⁶ Daniel Drezner, 'The song remains the same: International Relations after COVID-19', *International Organization* 74: 51, 2020, pp. E18–E35.

³⁷ Imad Mansour and William Thompson, *Shocks and rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

³⁸ Capoccia and Kelemen, 'The study of critical junctures', p. 349.

³⁹ Richard Haass, 'Revisiting the Iraq War', Project Syndicate, 8 July 2016, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/chilcot-report-iraq-war-lessons-by-richard-n--haass-2016-07>.

the way to a new regional balance of power and institutions. The effects were greater because the Iraq War occurred at a time when US unipolarity was still at its height; the Middle East constituted one of the most important testing grounds of the 'new world order' articulated by President George W. Bush following the Gulf War of 1991, and the 'Asia pivot' was still a project in the making. If that new world order had been bruised by the events of the later 1990s, including the demise of the MEPP and the rise of anti-western Islamic extremism, it had not been broken, and in some ways the Iraq War decision was further confirmation of that. But the protracted nature, cost and ultimate failure of that war to achieve its stated goals had a significant impact on US influence in the region and the wider world, lessening its diplomatic reputation.⁴⁰ In the words of Joseph Nye, it at once marked the end of the 'unipolar moment', the 'fall of US hegemony' and the failure of 'democratic enlargement'⁴¹—large claims, but the message was not lost on either allies or rivals.

None of this was intended. President Obama spoke of the war as one that should not have been authorized and waged, but he also spoke of moving 'beyond Iraq' and 'renewing American leadership'.⁴² Any renewal of leadership, however, would not take place in the Middle East theatre, and not on the same terms. The Iraq War heralded a distinctive change in the nature of US involvement in the region, from high to low intensity—highlighted by the withdrawal from Iraq itself, and later Afghanistan, and its taking more measured roles in Libya and Syria. Lynch notes how three consecutive presidents effectively downgraded their security commitments to the region.⁴³ True, this was not disengagement, but 'shifting engagement'.⁴⁴ In terms of military bases and arms exports, the US footprint in the region remains far larger than that of any other power, notwithstanding withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁵ In this regard, the path dependence of US military commitment and overseas presence is striking.⁴⁶ Still, after Iraq, the willingness to use traditional *hard* power resources has declined, with a preference for a light military presence, air power or 'surrogate' warfare, using proxy actors, drones and sanctions regimes with consequences that are unpredictable in terms of reputation and results.⁴⁷ The assassination, in January 2020, of Iran's General Soleimani by a US-ordered drone strike was illustrative of such a strategy, one designed to downgrade Iran as a regional power, visible also in the renewed sanctions regime after US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Alongside this reduced appetite for direct intervention, the soft power resources of the United States were evidently eroded, including its

⁴⁰ Samer Bakkour, *The end of the Middle East peace process: the failure of US diplomacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

⁴¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, 'The rise and fall of American hegemony from Wilson to Trump', *International Affairs* 95: 1, 2019, pp. 63–80.

⁴² Barack Obama, 'Renewing American leadership', *Foreign Affairs* 86: 4, 2007, pp. 2–16.

⁴³ Lynch, 'The end of the Middle East', p. 65.

⁴⁴ Andreas Krieg, 'Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East', *International Affairs* 92: 1, 2016, pp. 97–113 at p. 98.

⁴⁵ Andrew Payne, 'The politics of restraint in the Middle East', working paper, Oxford University, Aug. 2022.

⁴⁶ Neta Crawford, *Pentagon, climate change and war: charting the rise and fall of U.S. military emissions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).

⁴⁷ Krieg, 'Externalizing the burden of war', pp. 98–103.

credibility and status as a leading regional power, with consequences for allies and enemies alike. This was not the ‘new beginning’ that Obama promised in his Cairo speech.⁴⁸ Some of this could have happened anyway, or happened elsewhere, in the light of new global challenges and growing multipolarity, but events in Iraq were decisive in determining the new character of US involvement. Approving a new arms deal in July 2022, President Biden sought to reassure regional allies, but the wider lessons of US policy have not been lost on Arab states as they seek greater autonomy and new partners.

Nor were those lessons lost on America’s competitors or allies further afield. Both Russia and China, which opposed the war, and helped to block the possibility of any favourable UN Security Council resolution, were ultimately beneficiaries, though in different ways. They shared US concerns about Iraqi pretensions and stability in the Gulf, and were not inclined, at that time, to mount a robust opposition to the US intervention, for reasons that had to do with domestic politics and their international standing. However, they stood to gain materially and strategically in distancing themselves from the conflict and its subsequent fallout. New opportunities arose for these two powers and their aspirations to global influence: in supporting a sovereignty-first and pro-UN position, they were on the ‘right side’ in the Iraq War. For China the opportunities in MENA were mostly economic—the region became central to China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, unveiled in 2013. By 2020 China had become a major trading partner of regional states and importer of Middle East oil, but was also at the forefront of nuclear energy cooperation.⁴⁹ However, scholars have also noted that the war had another effect on China, encouraging it to ‘think globally’; to move away from isolationism and enjoy the benefits of membership in an expanded international society.⁵⁰

For Russia, the opportunities were economic, strategic and political, hastening the opportunity, effectively seized by President Putin, to re-establish a regional foothold—one lost since the 1960s.⁵¹ After the Libyan intervention, which Putin opposed, that opportunity was provided decisively by the Syrian civil war, which also aligned with Russia’s more activist ‘counter-revolutionary’ foreign policy as reflected in the colour revolutions: ‘Russia’s response to the Arab Spring, most notably the diplomatic, political, and military support it provided for the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, represented a major return of Russian power and influence in the region.’⁵² Russia’s growing influence in Syria was made possible not only by changes in its own foreign policy orientation, but also by the reduced US appetite for intervention after Iraq. For both Russia and China, therefore, the Iraq War helped to erode the myth of western omnipotence and open the Middle East as a competitive space for economic and strategic opportunity.

⁴⁸ President Obama, ‘A new beginning’, speech delivered in Cairo, 4 June 2009.

⁴⁹ Degang Sun, Haiyan Xu and Yichao Tu, ‘In with the new: China’s nuclear-energy diplomacy in the Middle East’, *Middle East Policy* 29: 1, 2022, pp. 41–60.

⁵⁰ Lanxin Xiang, *The quest for legitimacy in Chinese politics: an interpretation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

⁵¹ Nikolay Kozhanov, ed., *Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East: new trends, old traditions* (Oxford: Hurst, 2022).

⁵² Roland Dannreuther, ‘China and Russia in the Middle East’, in Louise Fawcett, ed., *International relations of the Middle East*, 6th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2023).

The effects on US allies were more complex, but nonetheless consequential. First, the war exposed divisions in Europe in respect of any common Middle East policy, thereby diluting the possibility of a united western response. Major EU states, notably France and Germany, opposed the intervention, upholding, like Russia, a principled UN-first approach. But Europe emerged divided, with Britain, Spain and some eastern European states supporting US action and thereby revealing their contrasting visions for the region.⁵³ This was damaging to the EU, the western alliance and Europe's image in MENA. Spain reversed its decision after the Madrid bombings in 2007, but this constituted a setback for any common European policy. The challenge then was for Europe to remain relevant in the postwar reconstruction period, one that had also followed the demise of the US-led MEPP. It is true that following the fallout from Iraq, European states engaged in a fresh series of multilateral initiatives with MENA states, including initially promising policies like the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean, building on the earlier 'Barcelona' Process. EU members also sought to mediate US hostility towards Iran, playing a major role in the pre-negotiations leading to the JCPOA. But these initially constructive aspects of EU policy were derailed, not only by competing regional interests, but also in the light of the damaging fallout from the subsequent Arab uprisings, which upended any common policy. The Arab uprisings demonstrated that the EU, like the US, was ultimately no 'friend of democratization';⁵⁴ further, they contributed to a populist backlash amid fresh divides among European states over the handling of the refugee crisis they unleashed, eroding its valuable normative power.⁵⁵ It could be argued, more tentatively, that Britain's position on Iraq and the subsequent uprisings and their fallout helped to distance it from the EU, thereby contributing to the outcome of the Brexit vote. If Brexit was in part about 'sovereignty', the decision to intervene with the United States, and without UN sanction, shows that such sovereignty matters were already emerging as Britain continued to flex its muscles in its former zone of influence. The lessons for the region and wider world are apparent. Middle Eastern states recognize Europe as the important economic partner which it is, but as a weak political force, recalling the Ariel Sharon jibe describing the EU as 'payers not players' in the region.⁵⁶

In short, the Iraq War produced geopolitical shifts which revealed the international stage as a much more plural and a competitive space for a variety of other powers, as demonstrated in the regional and institutional dimensions discussed below.

⁵³ Louise Fawcett, 'MENA and the EU: contrasting visions of region, power and order in a shared neighbourhood', *Contemporary Politics* 24: 1, 2018, pp. 65–80.

⁵⁴ Rosemary Hollis, 'No friend of democratization: Europe's role in the genesis of the Arab Spring', *International Affairs* 88: 1, 2012, p. 94.

⁵⁵ Raffaella del Sarto, 'Normative empire Europe: the European Union, its borderlands and the Arab Spring', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54: 2, 2015, pp. 215–32.

⁵⁶ El Hassan bin Talal, 'From payer to player in the Middle East', *Project Syndicate*, Oct. 2007, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/from-payer-to-player-in-the-middle-east>.

Regional relations

Beyond the challenge the war posed to US and western authority in the region and wider world, shortening the unipolar moment and eroding its liberal internationalist pretensions, there was substantial regional fallout. Most important among these aspects were the downgrading and fracturing of Iraq as a strong regional state, exacerbating widespread sectarian violence and fostering the rise of ISIS, alongside the emergence of the US-backed Kurdish regional government. Another was Iraq's deepening alignment on a Shi'a axis with Iran, and the attendant changes to the regional balance of power, including the strengthening and competitive position of other Gulf littoral states, notably Saudi Arabia. The empowerment and 'hegemonic strategies' of Iran and Saudi Arabia in engaging their state and non-state allies and proxies cannot be understood without reference to the Iraq War.⁵⁷ This section will focus on the postwar positions of Iran and Saudi Arabia, with a note on the contrasting roles of Israel and Turkey, examining their strategies in the competitive search for regional influence.

The region had long been the site for competition among aspiring regional powers. As discussed, however, a kind of uneasy balance around existing power hierarchies had prevailed, in part because of pressures imposed by external actors. Egypt's hegemonic aspirations, for example, had been held in check.⁵⁸ The invasion of Iraq, leading to regime change and state reconstruction, generated far-reaching changes to the regional architecture, fundamentally challenging the status quo. All states, US allies and rivals alike, were obliged to come up with new strategies and mechanisms to cope with the resulting instability and fallout from the weakening and implosion of a core regional state. Here it is important to note that, two recent wars notwithstanding, pre-2003 Iraq remained a powerful regional actor, one that had gained in stature following the Camp David (Arab–Israel) Accords in 1978. Those accords were followed by Egypt's isolation from much of the Arab world, with Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Syria seeing themselves as natural successors. And Iraq, unlike Syria, provided a vital counterbalance to Iran, with which it had a longstanding rivalry, predating the revolution, but one that exploded in the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88. Indeed, western powers and Arab states alike viewed Iraq as a useful balancer against the revolutionary and destabilizing message of the Islamic Republic, and supported the Iraqis in the war between the two states for precisely that reason. The war ended with the UN-brokered ceasefire—effectively a defeat for Iraq, which had started it, and a partial victory for Iran, which survived it. This in part explains Iraq's subsequent decision to launch another war against Kuwait, leading to the Gulf War of 1991, the precursor to the 2003 war which saw the demise of Saddam Hussein's regional pretensions. The above summary shows Iraq's central importance within the regional power structures and the significance of its removal as a core state at a time of global and regional instability.

⁵⁷ Stein, *International relations in the Middle East*.

⁵⁸ Ian Lustick, 'The absence of Middle Eastern great powers: political "backwardness" in historical perspective', *International Organization* 51: 4, 1997, pp. 653–83.

The effects on the region were profound, becoming quickly entangled with the fast pace of developments since the start of the Arab uprisings late in 2010. A few salient features emerge. Saudi Arabia and Iran, with their respective alliance partners and proxies, swiftly became key regional rivals in the 'struggle to shape the Middle East',⁵⁹ a rivalry that has played out subsequently in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, the Gulf itself and beyond. Israel's position on regional security issues also hardened, as the fallout from Iraq, following the failure of the MEPP, threatened a new round of regional instability. Ultimately, that instability, and the 'Iran threat' nudged some Arab states closer to Israel, further rupturing any Arab consensus. Turkey's strategy, in contrast, sought to demonstrate its regional and indeed global leadership, through balancing and mediating strategies; but its position was complicated by domestic concerns, including how to deal with the Kurdish question within and beyond its borders.

Iran had not sought the position and reputation of 'rogue state' that it came to acquire. Iran wanted recognition and status as a major regional power; this was a longstanding goal.⁶⁰ It had some supportive allies in the region, notably Syria, and the wider world, where its 'Southern', anti-imperial stance was popular with states such as Cuba and Venezuela for example. But it had limited regional reach and also sought opportunities for collaboration with the United States (and indeed Saudi Arabia) both before and after 9/11, over which Iran's president offered sympathy to the US. It was the Bush administration's determination to place Iran, like Iraq and North Korea, on the president's 'axis of evil' that squandered that opportunity and proved decisive in setting relations firmly on a hostile track. Indeed, some scholars have hinted that it was this aspect of US policy, alongside the unstable environment generated by the Iraq War, that encouraged Iran to unfreeze its dormant nuclear development programme in 2005.⁶¹ The chaos and instability generated by the war provided Iran with the opportunity to act out its regional ambitions via Iraq, through its growing links with the new Iraqi regime and the consolidation of what became known as the Hezbollah–Iraq–Syria–Hamas (HISH) alliance. Its relations with Syria were further strengthened during the course of the Syrian civil war. Paradoxically, both the development of Iran's nuclear programme and the multilateral efforts to curb it, resulting finally in the Obama-brokered deal of 2015, reflected Iran's new capabilities, giving rise to continuing security anxieties among Arab states and Israel, who saw the deal as being too permissive. And following President Trump's decision to leave the JCPOA, Iran's nuclear ambitions and its influential regional stance survive—despite the punitive impact of US sanctions and COVID-19, which hit the country hard—making it a vital and enduring element in any regional power balance.

⁵⁹ Simon Mabon and Edward Wastnidge, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: the struggle to shape the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

⁶⁰ Louise Fawcett and Sharinee Jagtiani, 'Regional powers, global aspirations: India and Iran', *International Politics*, publ. online 13 May 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00374-z>.

⁶¹ See Michael Hirsh, 'America's Iran follies', *Foreign Policy*, 9 June, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/09/iran-nuclear-deal-jcpoa-biden-trump-khamenei/>.

Saudi Arabia, in contrast, had been a reluctant regional great power, constrained in acting beyond its borders, and one that had stayed out of the limelight in major regional conflicts. This started to change. The Saudis, who were implicated in the 9/11 attacks, and then experienced terrorism on their own soil, were disappointed in the cooling relationship with the United States and sought to diversify their international alliances and strengthen their regional standing. Prior to the Iraq War, in a sign of new regional activism, King Abdullah proposed an Arab peace initiative to revive an Arab consensus around Arab–Israel questions. In conversations with the United States before the decision to invade, the Saudis made clear their opposition to the war. This did not prevent subsequent cooperation, including the use of Saudi bases, but it marked the beginning of a more assertive policy, one which did not necessarily toe the US line, as expanding Saudi links with China and Russia and the regime's later position on Ukraine have revealed. That said, Saudi Arabia, like other close US allies, namely Israel, were increasingly fearful of the Iran threat and prepared to take on the role of balancing or containing Iran, a role that has continued since the early years of the war and moved into different theatres, notably Yemen, as well as Syria and Lebanon. Arms purchases tell a compelling story, with several Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), recording 'massive' spending levels after 2007.⁶²

Saudi relations with Iran had been competitive, but not invariably hostile. Under the Shah's regime there had been periods of *rapprochement*—both were conservative monarchies and world-leading oil producers. The Iranian revolution, however, threatened to spill over into neighbouring Gulf states with restive Shi'a populations, and generated new competition over leadership of the Muslim world and guardianship of its holy sites. Alongside the alleged links between Iran and terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia, the effects of the Iraq War proved decisive in informing Saudi policy, particularly following the election in 2006 of Shi'a premier Nouri al-Maliki. The United States had sought to encourage relations between Iraq and other regional states, but the Saudis remained deeply suspicious of the new regime. Early opportunities to engage with Iraq were lost, and Maliki's government, whose term extended to 2014, moved closer to Iran.⁶³ Though Iraq's relations with Saudi Arabia subsequently improved, the war and its consequences proved critical, not only in embedding the Saudi–Iran rivalry, but in deepening sectarian divides in Iraq and beyond while drawing in other regional states and actors. As the region entered a new period of turmoil following the Arab uprisings, the rivalry extended to Syria and Yemen, with the two states backing different sides in their respective civil wars.

If the Saudi–Iran rivalry informed the new balance of power, and intersected with the geopolitical dimensions already described, there were other important features to the emerging regional architecture. First, among the Arab Gulf states themselves, fresh tensions emerged. Qatar, drawing on its oil wealth and soft

⁶² Anthony Cordesman, *Changing patterns of arms imports in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, updated 2016).

⁶³ Katherine Harvey, *A self-fulfilling prophecy: the Saudi struggle for Iraq* (Oxford: Hurst, 2022).

power, contested the Saudi bid for regional hegemony, embracing a more activist foreign policy. Though a small state, its potential influence on the regional stage was visible in its media presence and mediation roles, particularly in the Lebanese conflict of 2008. Qatar's friendlier relations with Iran, alongside continuing support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, produced serious divergences with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This led, in 2017, to the formation of an Arab 'Quartet' seeking to isolate and sanction Qatar, effectively fracturing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) bloc.⁶⁴ Though these developments occurred beyond the Iraq War itself, and there have been subsequent moves to repair the GCC consensus, the effects of Iran's greater empowerment, Qatar's more independent foreign policy stance and the Saudi-UAE alliance were all important elements in the changing strategic architecture of the Gulf.⁶⁵

The position of the region's two other non-Arab states—Israel and Turkey—merits mention, though any detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this article. Both experienced strong impacts from the Iraq War and subsequent developments, though in different ways. If for Israel the main issues were related to the empowerment of Iran and its regional proxies, for Turkey they were related to the contradictory demands imposed by its membership of the western alliance, its desire to pursue a more activist regional policy, and the challenges posed by the emergence of the Kurdish regional government in Iraq and its impact in and beyond Turkey itself.⁶⁶

Israel was accustomed to managing its security dilemma successfully in the fragmented regional space, where 'rejectionist' Arab states and Palestine's allies had been its major concern.⁶⁷ This changed after the Iraq War, when the Iran threat became all-consuming, aligning Israel more closely with western powers, particularly the United States, which saw Iran as an irremediably hostile force in regional and international politics. Israel, like Saudi Arabia, was a consistent opponent of Iran's nuclear programme and determined to curb its regional pretensions alongside the activities of its proxies in Lebanon and Palestine, welcoming the more assertive role of US President Trump. Both Turkey and Israel were already major regional powers: the Iraq War did not change that. But the war had important consequences in terms of adjusting their domestic and security priorities. For Israel it was the securitization of the Iran threat; for Turkey the Kurdish one, with all their different dimensions, with consequences that shaped new alliances and foreign policy orientations. Israel, for example, could draw on the new Arab disunity, reaching deeper into former Arab heartlands for new alliances and partners, as demonstrated by the Abraham Accords. Turkey's balancing act between East and West has proved harder to sustain. Maintaining its

⁶⁴ Saoud Al-Eshaq and Amjed Rasheed, 'The "David" in a divided Gulf: Qatar's foreign policy and the 2017 Gulf crisis', *Middle East Policy*, no. 29, March 2022, pp. 30–45.

⁶⁵ William Guéraiche and Kristian Alexander, eds, *Facets of security in the United Arab Emirates* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

⁶⁶ Emel Parlar Dal, 'Conceptualising and testing the "emerging regional power" of Turkey in the shifting international order', *Third World Quarterly* 37: 8, 2016, pp. 1425–53.

⁶⁷ Martin Beck, 'Israel: politics in a highly fragmented region', in Daniel Flemes, ed., *Regional leadership in the global system* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

liberal authoritarianism at home and a policy of ‘strategic autonomy’ abroad has proved challenging on multiple fronts.⁶⁸

Regional institutions

The international and regional-level changes flowing from the Iraq War are easy to identify, even if those changes accelerated beyond the war itself. At the level of regional institutions, understood here as formal and informal structures of cooperation between regional states, the changes were more subtle and less immediate, but consequential nonetheless. At first sight, the major Arab institutions most affected—the LAS and the GCC—survived the immediate fallout from the Iraq War, as they had survived the damaging effects of the previous Gulf War, though it led to the resignation of the League’s Secretary-General.⁶⁹ Yet institutional survival was somewhat deceptive, since regional institutions were already weak. And the Iraq War ultimately ruptured any pretence of Arab regional organizations, as collective decision-making bodies, playing a meaningful role in resolving regional conflicts. The decision to invade Iraq was made by the United States and its allies, and opposed, to a greater or lesser degree, by all Arab states, who had little say in its execution or resolution. The turmoil it caused necessarily had a major impact, leading to institutional crisis, volatility and remaking.⁷⁰

The façade of formal regionalism persisted beyond the war with the usual rounds of summits and meetings. The GCC, in particular, was active, proposing an expanded membership to include Jordan and Morocco, and later a GCC ‘Union’, though neither was acted upon. Following the early Arab uprisings, there was a brief and celebrated ‘revival’ in the fortunes of both organizations. At western prompting, both the LAS and the GCC endorsed UN Resolution 1973 upholding a no-fly zone in Libya; supported negotiations in Yemen and Syria; and moved to isolate President Assad’s regime. Syria remains excluded from the LAS, despite efforts to reinstate it, exposing the extent of inter-Arab divisions. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen that such initiatives were not the result of any strengthening of Arab institutions, but rather the reverse. They were the effect of pressures from outside actors and key regional states, such as Saudi Arabia, revealing the changes to the regional architecture and the weakening of any Arab consensus, described above. Indeed, with the regional order in crisis, the League simply ‘outsourced its responsibilities to NATO and the UN, inviting them to topple Arab regimes or interfere in their domestic affairs, thus negating yet again its very *raison d’être* as an institution responsible for collective Arab action and security’.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, ‘Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?’, *International Affairs* 97: 4, 2021, pp. 1085–104.

⁶⁹ See further Louise Fawcett, ‘Regionalism and Alliances in the Middle East’, in Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East*.

⁷⁰ Raffaella del Sarto and Eduard Soler i Lecha, ‘The mirage of regionalism in MENA’, *MENARA Project* (CIDOB: Barcelona, 2018); Larbi Sadiki, ‘Regionalism in crisis: GCC integration without democracy’, *International Spectator* 55: 2, 2020, pp. 17–33.

⁷¹ Salloukh, ‘The Arab uprisings and the geopolitics of the Middle East’, p. 43.

In the case of the GCC's decision to use its 'Peninsular Shield' defence system to quell the Bahrain uprising—a Shi'a-led movement—Saudi influence prevailed. A few years later, the Saudis mounted a coalition force against the Iran-supported Houthis in Yemen—a war that has continued, with devastating humanitarian consequences. All this was evidence that Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies were determined to prevent the spread of Iran-led Shi'a influence, partly the product of the Iraq War. Closer relations with Israel, which shared similar concerns, were a logical next step, finally realized in the Abraham Accords. At all levels, therefore, there were fundamental changes to existing institutions and the production of new alliance frameworks emerging from the disruption related to the Iraq War. Qatar has returned to the GCC, but its position on core issues that split the Council has not changed.

Another regional institution, the Arab Maghreb Union, deserves mention merely to illustrate the general crisis of Middle East regionalism. A 'Union' in name alone, it has been paralysed by longstanding rivalries and differences between its members. It failed to mount any joint response to either the Iraq War or the subsequent Arab uprisings, even where the latter directly involved two of its own members, Tunisia and Libya. Despite its potential as an economic and security bloc, it has not held a high-level meeting since 1994; a summit proposed in 2003, after the Iraq War, was postponed at Libya's request. As with other Arab institutions, any prospects of deeper cooperation, let alone unity, are slim.

If existing Middle East regional institutions are notable for their fragility and inaction, it is interesting to observe how other axes of cooperation have been developing, both among regional states themselves, such as the short-lived Quartet and the Abraham Accords, but also with other proximate regions not traditionally considered to be part of MENA. Here regional states, especially those on its outer perimeter, have been looking beyond the region to develop new alliances and arenas of cooperation. This is especially relevant in the cases of Iran and Turkey, both of which have pursued initiatives to reconnect with the wider Eurasian space, while certain Arab Gulf states have done the same in respect to flourishing connections with the Indo-Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa. Both Iran and Turkey are members of the Economic Cooperation Organization, linking Iran's neighbours, Pakistan and Afghanistan, with post-Soviet Muslim republics. Turkey has pursued closer ties with Russia and proximate states in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization. In 2004 Iran applied for associate membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (which includes both Russia and China), gaining full membership in 2021—a move described as a 'major diplomatic victory'.⁷² Other connections with the Eurasian space proceed apace.⁷³ Further south, the Indian Ocean Rim Association now includes three Gulf states, with the UAE currently acting as chair. Such newer institutional arrangements have emerged to fill economic and security gaps and establish future pathways for collaboration,

⁷² Nicole Grajewski, *Iranian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: motivations and implications* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 Sept. 2021).

⁷³ Mohsen Milani, *Iran in a reconnecting Eurasia* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016).

while mapping onto the wider geopolitical changes described above. They reveal not only the limitations of the region's existing institutional architecture and the capacities of new regional powers, but also the way in which the region has spilled over its postcolonial borders into its adjoining subregions. In short, the challenges to regional institutions that the Iraq War brought starkly into focus, alongside the absence of any meaningful regional security dialogue or consensus, have contributed to a sea-change in institutional arrangements and alignments, in which old institutions are downgraded as new frameworks emerge.

Conclusion

In casting the Iraq War of 2003 as a major inflexion point in the making of a new regional architecture, and isolating some of its key effects, this article has offered a retrospective on the profound and enduring consequences of the war and its place in the evolving regional security order, highlighting key features of change. This is important, because the significance of the war has frequently been lost in the fast pace of subsequent events and also by the reluctance of its key proponents to acknowledge its consequences fully. Extending the journal's critical analysis in 2013, this contribution has sought to return the war to the centre of analyses of the region and the wider world in the twenty-first century.

One thing is certain: beyond the removal of Saddam Hussein, the Iraq War failed to achieve the key goals anticipated by its major protagonists, notably the United States and Britain, which had sought to promote the war as a liberal crusade against a despotic and dangerous regime with contagion effects that would benefit the region and the wider world. In failing these goals, and in misreading Iraq's intentions and capacity, the war seriously damaged western interests and credibility. Even regime change, a lesson reinforced by the Libyan intervention, appeared as an increasingly toxic foreign policy tool. It also generated new instabilities and tensions, aggravating fault-lines at domestic, regional and international levels with which peoples and governments across the region are still contending. Some regional states and actors may, arguably, have been beneficiaries of such changes, but overall, the Iraq War left a trail of unintended consequences, with major security implications, revealing how very poorly judged and mismanaged was the US-led decision to go to war, remove Saddam Hussein and remake the Iraqi state. From the tensions and lessons of the war there have evolved new patterns and practices leading to a changing regional order, even before the Arab uprisings intervened to consolidate those trends.

This, then, was a critical juncture for the 'old' Middle East—more 'critical' than other junctures precisely for the coincidence of different levels of change: without the disruptive decision to intervene in Iraq, coming on the heels of the Afghan intervention, the regional balance of power would not have experienced such rapid adjustment, nor would it have opened the field in Iraq and the wider Middle East to such intense regional and external competition. True, some of that competition among external and regional powers could have emerged anyway, but

the timing, nature and outcome would have differed. A sanctioned Iraq, subject to UN inspections, might have become subject to Arab Spring unrest, like its Arab neighbours, but with quite different results. Without the Iraq War, it is unlikely that the sectarian divides exacerbated by the war or the Saudi–Iran rivalry, or the securitization of sectarian politics across the region, would have occurred—at least not to the same degree. As one scholar observes, ‘sectarianism as the main narrative of regional conflict emerged following the 2003 invasion of Iraq’, later becoming ‘entrenched via the political vacuum and ensuing geopolitical competition dynamics’ that followed the 2011 Arab uprisings.⁷⁴ While those uprisings themselves cannot be directly linked to the Iraq War, their outcomes—and the sectarian violence, and the subsequent neo-authoritarian turn that accompanied them—can.

Such counterfactuals serve to highlight the central argument of this article. At all three levels, fundamental and irreversible changes have occurred in the region’s security landscape, triggered by the war itself and then reflected in geopolitical changes and in the new power distribution and the changing face of regional institutions. As highlighted, there is considerable turbulence in the new emerging regional order or architecture,⁷⁵ but the changes are such that any return to prior orders would be hard to achieve. This is reflected in new international alignments—effectively a ‘three-power’ Middle East—a new regional balance of power incorporating alliances between states and non-state actors, and the fragmentation and remaking of regional institutions within a reconstructed and expanded regional framework. Processes of change within the emerging order are still under way. However, beyond the Arab uprisings, more recent events, such as the Ukraine war, or the region’s responses to the COVID–19 pandemic, have helped to underscore some of the emerging patterns which have produced at least partial dealignment from the West and contributed to new alignments with Russia, China and other emerging powers. For many Middle Eastern states today, there are clear affinities between the harder approach to sovereignty of China and Russia, alongside other states of the global South, and scepticism about the content and intent of the ‘liberal international order’ which extends to the democratization policies of the United States and European powers. The Iraq War ended an era of western hubris about the theory and practice of democracy promotion,⁷⁶ which, combined with the reversals of the Arab uprisings, has seen a return to a more authoritarian status quo in MENA and in the wider world. These developments are already being reflected in the region’s changing security architecture and its political arrangements and alliances, which the Iraq War and its consequences helped indelibly to shape.

⁷⁴ Kristina Kausch, ‘Identity politics and regional order in the levant’, *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 15: 60, 2018, p. 26.

⁷⁵ See Walid Hazbun, ‘In America’s wake: turbulence and insecurity in the Middle East’, *POMEPS Studies* 34, March 2019, pp. 14–17.

⁷⁶ See Laurence Whitehead, ‘Losing ‘the force’? The ‘dark side’ of democratization after Iraq’, *Democratization* 16: 2, 2009, pp. 215–42.

