Reshuffling of Political and Military Alliances

Geopolitical Trends, Shifts, Challenges and Fractures of the Post-Arab Spring (2020-2021)

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After the first decade (2010-2020) following the watershed events dubbed as the “Arab Spring,” many Arab States are either unstable or simply in shambles, and the old Arab political order is collapsing while the new geopolitical landscape is marred by a chaotic shift of alliances, proxy wars and sectarian violence. If in the past we had some sort of a “regional Arab system,” today we have a “region without a system,” where non-state actors are filling the vacuum left open by weakened Arab states’ power systems and where non-Arab countries like Israel, Iran and Turkey are gaining ground, clout and influence.

In summary, the first ten years following the immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi, on 17 December 2010, have been years of bitter harvest and of disappointment and disenchantment. The general outlook has been disheartening. Arab regimes have been busy either containing Iranian expansionism, dislodging the Muslim Brotherhood, undermining the Arab Spring dynamics, or simply surviving. Some followed their own agenda with outsized diplomacy. Others tried to diversify their foreign alliances. New re-alignments brought about new alliances. A greater cause for concern is the security vacuum, in the absence of any regional security architecture. Not only have the Middle East and North Africa, as a region, been incapable of filling the security vacuum, but the ability of the states themselves to address security concerns has decreased dramatically. The reliance on the West has become crucial at a time when Western powers themselves are facing huge economic and political challenges at home and are losing hegemonic influence abroad.

In such a context, Russia and China have raised their profile both in the region and outside of it. This was clear in the Syrian crisis where they protected, de facto, the Syrian regime. By opposing any Western attempt to bring the Syrian issue to the Security Council, China and Russia positioned themselves as “alternative reliable allies.” Whether these two countries are capable or willing to assume the responsibilities of a “big power,” as guarantors of security, remains to be seen.

Given all these considerations, no one can guess at this stage the outcome of the second post-Arab Spring decade (2020-2030). Will we witness happy transitions, mass delusion, a return to authoritarianism or illiberal democracy? Will we see a wake-up call for a new Arab revival? Regrettably, the general trends of the past two years (2020-2021) do not look promising. But there are some signs, mainly in Mashreq countries, to indicate a willingness to bury the hatchet of distrust.

Geopolitical Events in 2020-2021

2020-2021 has been a period of turmoil and havoc: an unprecedented epidemic, Trump’s “Deal of the Century,” the so-called “Abraham Accords,” the fourth Israeli offensive in Gaza and persistent geopolitical fractures such as the quagmire that is Lebanon, the bumpy political process in Libya and the backsliding to authoritarian rule in Tunisia. But there have been some signs of “détente” and a significant shift of alliances, with a fragile rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the end of the internal GCC rift between Qatar and its fellow Gulf partners and a more pragmatic Turkey.
The Geopolitics of the Coronavirus in the Arab World

The coronavirus epidemic will be reported in history books as the most world-shattering health disease in recent times. The far-ranging consequences of the epidemic will not be limited to an economic slump and higher public debt. It will also have a transformational effect on states and societies and lead to significant shifts in the distribution of power at the regional and international level.

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All Arab and Mediterranean countries have been severely hit, as the pandemic struck at the worst moment, laying bare the states’ bad governance and incompetence and the absence of a collective and concerted response. All Arab states responded promptly to control infections: school and business closures, lockdowns and border controls. But these measures were unevenly applied: the most populated countries, refugee camps, migrant workers, occupied Palestinian territories and conflict zones were severely affected. International organizations reported some six million cases and 150,000 deaths across the 22 Arab states. But there has been significant underreporting, as the real figures are certainly higher. With the exception of the Gulf’s rich oil-producing countries (80% fully vaccinated), and, to a lesser extent, Morocco (around 65%) and Tunisia (40%), the overall vaccination rate in other Arab countries was less than 15%. In general, hospitalizations and mortality rates have been lower than in other regions because the Arab world is the “most youthful.”

The socioeconomic cost of the pandemic has been devastating. In the Arab Gulf region, the pandemic struck at the worst possible moment, marked by a slump in oil prices to unprecedented levels. However, these countries have better staffed and equipped health systems and sufficient financial resources to cope with the disease. But expatriate workers have been disproportionately affected, as businesses and construction works were brought to a halt, depleting migrants’ financial remittances.

In all other Arab countries, the negative impact was severe. Crippling financial crisis (Lebanon), chronic political instability (Iraq), protracted conflicts and civil strife (Yemen, Libya, Syria), dysfunctional bureaucracies, inefficiency, bad governance and the corruption of the political systems of all Arab countries only served to increase their misfortunes. The paralysis of the tourist industry (10 to 15 % of GDP in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan) and the dwindling of migrants’ remittances drastically diminished countries’ abilities to weather the storm. It is estimated that in 2020, the region’s businesses lost $500 billion of market capital and $400 billion in 2021. It is also estimated that four to five million jobs have been lost, increasing poverty rates to a real average of 30-35%.

Did Covid-19 serve as an eye-opener, triggering internal reform or regional strategic dynamics? Sadly, the answer is no. In some countries (Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt) the pandemic offered the incumbent regimes an opportunity to crack down on legitimate speech and stifle the protest movements under the guise of public health safety. Other countries indulged in scapegoating. On Twitter, hashtags such as “coronavirus Qatar” blamed Qatar for spreading the virus. On 10 March 2020, the Council of Ministers in Saudi Arabia, accused Iran of “bearing direct responsibility for the outbreak of the corona infection.” Later, Saudi Arabia accused Saudi Shia inhabitants of “illegally visiting Iran and bringing back the virus with them.”

Thus, hopes that the pandemic would spur political reform or put an end to internal strife and regional conflicts were dashed in 2020 and 2021. Authoritarian regimes have remained intact, even becoming emboldened, and no one should expect these regimes to embrace genuine reform any time soon. There has been no lull in raging conflicts, mainly in Yemen. Israel has further tightened its grip on the occupied Palestinian territories with total impunity. Bashar El Assad is still in the saddle and there are signs of normalization between his regime and many Arab countries, as well as calls for the reintegration of Syria into the League of Arab States. On 18 March 2022, Bashar al-Assad made his first visit to the Emirates. The Libyan crisis further deepened after Khalifa Haftar claimed he has “legitimate mandate” to govern Libya (27 April 2020). Morocco and Algeria
continued their squabble. The League of Arab States remained as a bystander, and the League’s scheduled 2020 Summit, rather than showing commitment to health cooperation, was cancelled.

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to Jerusalem and demonstrated a disturbing indifference to Israeli settlement expansion... we believe that Europe should embrace and promote a plan that respects the basic principles of international law as reflected in the agreed EU parameters for a resolution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict."

The letter reflects the "malaise" that Trump’s plan generated in many European circles. Yet there were mixed reactions from European capitals, with some allies, notably the United Kingdom, giving the so-called "Deal of the Century" their backing and others firmly rejecting the proposal out of hand. The EU itself did not want to turn its back on the US Administration, welcoming any moves that could lead to peace, but it did acknowledge the flaws of the plan and reaffirmed its commitment to the two-state solution.

**The Abraham Accords (15 August 2020)**

The "normalization" accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates were announced on 15 August 2020. Bahrain joined the Accords on 11 September and the White House signing ceremony took place on 15 September. After the announcement of the Deal of the Century, the Accords represent another major foreign policy achievement for Israel, Netanyahu’s doctrine of “Peace for Peace, and Peace through strength” proving to have paid off. The only promise Netanyahu made was to "suspend" the annexation of the Jordan Valley and other parts of the Occupied Territories. To assuage the rage and wrath of the Palestinians, the UAE hailed the suspension of annexation as “a diplomatic victory” for the Palestinian people.

The reality tells another story: the Accords do not mention the end of Israeli occupation, but rather preserve the territorial status-quo, allowing Israel to sideline the Palestinian leadership, ignore the Palestinians and bury the idea of the two-state solution. As Tova Norlen and Tamir Sinai aptly argue, “the deal symbolizes a geopolitical shift in Middle Eastern security, and a significant step in the gradual but deliberate long-term efforts of Israel to normalize relations with its Arab neighbours without having to compromise on the Palestinian issue.”

Indeed, for many observers, the deal represents the end of the Palestinians’ “veto power” on Israel’s relationship with its Arab neighbours and the return to state realpolitik. To put it in a nutshell: Palestine has lost its symbolic centrality in Arab official politics and is no longer a major concern. Some Arab countries do not wish to remain “constrained” by automatic solidarity with the Palestinian cause to the detriment of their own interests and security agenda. That is why Trump’s transactional foreign policy has been so successful, not only in the Gulf, but also in Morocco and Sudan. To Morocco, Trump promised to recognize its sovereignty over Western Sahara. To Sudan, he promised to take the country off the “terrorist list.” So, far from being a diplomatic breakthrough, the Accords appear to be a “bargaining chip.”

It is too early to assess the possible impact of the normalization agreements on regional security. There is no doubt that the deal has tilted the balance of power in Israel’s favour, since it has moved its military capabilities into the heart of the Gulf, to the doorstep of its arch-enemy, Iran; opened a vast market for Israel’s military-industrial complex, allowed Israel to tighten the noose on Iran through military bases in the Gulf, Iraqi Kurdistan and Azerbaijan; and may have increased Israel’s veto “power on arms purchases” by Gulf states.

The UAE is concerned by the preservation of the Emirates’ political stability and strives to benefit from Israeli technology, attract visitors, increase its trade and shield the Emirates from insurgency or the Iranian threat. In a scenario of possible American disengagement from the region, the Emirates sees Israel as a substitute to the US, as a security guarantor but with American weaponry (possible purchase by the UAE of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters) with Israel’s consent. Jeffrey Goldberg summarizes it as follows: "In many ways, the Abraham Accords amount to an arms deal. The UAE and other states that now engage with Israel will find themselves armed with a better class of American weaponry." Morocco is obsessed with the issue of its sovereignty over Western Sahara. The Accords are supposed to boost Morocco’s standing and security, through the transfer of Israeli technical know-how (including the Pegasus Programme) and military cooperation. Such an orientation has further strained relations with Algeria, which severed its diplomatic ties with Morocco.

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1 www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/abraham-accords-paradigm-shift-or-realpolitik
Morocco and shut the Gas pipeline that crosses through its territory.

In Sudan, a military coup led by General Adel Fattah al-Burhan, overthrew the civil government (25 October 2021). Massive protests filled the streets calling for a return to civil rule. The normalization accords have not been the main drivers of the street protests, but they have certainly added fuel to a raging fire.

In summary, the Abraham Accords, which are hailed by Israel as significant diplomatic progress in the Gulf and Maghreb regions, have created a dangerous dynamic which may lead to a strategic disaster, with increased tensions in the Gulf, proxy wars (in Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon), increased friction between Algeria and Morocco, total paralysis of the Arab Maghreb Union and continued turmoil in Sudan.

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Separate peace deals with some Arab countries will not lead to peaceful coexistence unless the “core Palestinian issue” is addressed. Focusing on external enemies while continuing the occupation and expanding Israel’s settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a recipe for strategic disaster. Norlen and Sinai aptly warn that the normalization trend “postpones the tragedy but cannot avoid it, as the future can never fully bury the past.”

The Fourth Israeli Offensive in Gaza (May 2021)

The fourth Israeli offensive in Gaza in May 2021 was a sad reminder of the risk of shelving, postponing or sidestepping the Palestinian issue, and of the unfounded belief that Israel’s status quo in the Occupied Territories can remain unchallenged.

The fourth Israel-Hamas war (10-21 May 2021) was triggered on 6 May 2021, when Palestinians began protests against the eviction of Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah in occupied East Jerusalem (illegally annexed by Israel), the storming by Israeli nationalists of the Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound in Jerusalem, and the announcement of the annual Jerusalem Day march, the so-called Dance of Flags, by far-right Jewish nationalists. On 10 May, Hamas gave Israel an ultimatum to withdraw security forces from the Al-Aqsa Compound. With no response from Israel, militant groups in Gaza fired rockets into Israel. Israel immediately launched deadly airstrikes at Gaza, as it had in 2008-2012 and 2014. After 11 days of fighting, 256 Palestinians were killed, including 66 children, and more than 2,000 injured. 13 Israelis were killed and around 200 injured. As of 20 May, more than 72,000 Palestinians had been displaced. As usual, Israel said that “it retaliated to Hamas rockets” and “acted in legitimate self-defence,” ignoring the root causes of the conflict.

The 2021 Hamas-Israel war ended with a huge loss of lives and resources, mainly in the over-populated Gaza Strip. It revealed, once again, the intolerable situation of Palestinians living under Israeli control in Jerusalem and in other parts of the Occupied Territories. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) called on Israel to stop all forced evictions of Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah, as they may constitute “war crimes.” While Human Rights Watch released a statement saying that the unequal rights between Palestinians and Jewish residents of East Jerusalem “underscore the reality of apartheid in East Jerusalem.” Later, on 1 February 2022, Amnesty International published its 200-page report accusing Israel of subjecting Palestinians to a system of apartheid, and saying that the International Criminal Court should investigate crimes against humanity.

Once again, the fourth war between Hamas and Israel in less than 14 years demonstrates the mistaken belief that the Palestinian issue, the heart of the geopolitical turmoil in the Middle East, can be ignored.

Geopolitical Fractures: Libya’s Quagmire, State Collapse in Lebanon and Tunisia’s Backsliding to Authoritarian Rule

Until 2021, Libya had been the theatre of a civil war between the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and the leader of the self-proclaimed eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA).
The war took a dramatic turn when Haftar’s army, with some military and diplomatic backing from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Russia and even France, attempted, in April 2019, to capture Tripoli. Haftar’s assault on the capital ended without victory in June 2020. In September 2020, Haftar’s forces and his allies lifted a nine-month oil export blockade. On 23 October 2020, the Libyan National Army, led by Haftar and supported by his allies, and the Government of National Accord, led by Fayez Al-Serraj and his main backer, Turkey, signed a cease-fire agreement. It was followed, in early 2021, by an agreement to form an interim national unity government, in an effort to pave the way to ending political feuds and prepare for transparent and credible presidential and parliamentary elections for 24 December 2021. As Libya continued to draw in foreign backers, the UN Security Council adopted, in April 2021, resolutions 2507 and 2571, demanding the “withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries without further delay.” The High National Election Commission opened registration for all candidates on 8 November 2021.

If the Lebanese State collapses, significant security challenges and vacuums will emerge

Libya appeared to be on the right track. A total of 98 presidential candidates were registered, but 25 were considered non-eligible, among them the Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah (due to his commitment that he would not run), Khalifa Haftar (for his role in the 2019 civil war) and Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi (wanted by the International Criminal Court). The Sabha Court ruled in favour of Saif al-Islam and the Tripoli Appeal Court accepted Haftar’s and Dbeibah’s candidacies. But tensions remained high and elections were postponed over disputes between rival factions on laws governing the voting. The political landscape deteriorated further after the Tobruk-based House of Representatives declared that the Government of National Unity, established in accordance with the 2021 Geneva Process, was no longer valid, and that Dbeibah’s term was considered to have expired and that a replacement was necessary. The Tobruk-based Parliament appointed a new Prime Minister, Ahmad Bashaga, while the interim Prime Minister, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah refused to step aside. Bashaga, who was lauded by Russia and Egypt, formed a cabinet, and the eastern-based Parliament gave it confidence on 3 March 2022. As expected, the vote of confidence was rejected by Libya’s High Council of State in Tripoli. Racked by conflict since 2011, Libya was once again hostage “to a showdown between two self-serving centres of power.” With such a gloomy picture, one may wonder if Libya will overcome the scourge of its geopolitical fractures and the interference of its foreign backers and hold elections in the summer of 2022.

Lebanon is grappling with a crippling financial crisis that led to an 80% devaluation of the Lebanese pound and to debt default (March 2020) and is facing huge street protests against the corruption and incompetence of the political elite. The horrific explosion at the Port of Beirut on the 4 August laid bare the incompetence of the successive Lebanese governments and fuelled renewed anger among the population. It is true that most of the problems of Lebanon are of its own making, as confessional elites are known for their entrenched patronage and cronyism, poor governance and lack of accountability, as well as being incapable of engineering political reform that avoids “a slide toward the total failure of state institutions and the precipitous downturn of the country’s economic and social indicators.”

But it is also true that the country – an arena of competing powers – has been severely affected by proxy wars on its soil, the influx of Syrian refugees, the embargo imposed on Syria and by the general destabilization of the Middle East. Fabrice Balanche offers a perfect description of Lebanese geopolitics: “In a system structured by institutionalized communitarianism, decisions made in the political sphere are very much shaped by regional power relationships and

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the interventions of both regional and external patrons (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, USA and Russia).\(^5\)

At the time of writing, Lebanon is in a total mess: Saad Hariri, the leader of the Sunni community, has renounced his post as Prime Minister, the Hezbollah-Amal duo enjoys a majority in the Parliament, which assures them of a Christian President who is fully to their liking. While the Christian camp is divided between those totally hostile to Hezbollah’s “veto power” and influence on the political process and those who seek alliance with the group in their bid for the Presidency.

The internal disputes of the Lebanese confessional communities have been further exacerbated by tensions with the Gulf countries and the boycott imposed by Saudi Arabia on all imports from Lebanon. Saudi Arabia was infuriated by remarks made by a Lebanese minister, George Kordahi, criticizing Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen, by Hezbollah’s role in the conflict between the the Shia Houthis and the Gulf countries and by its cosy relationship with Bahraini Shia dissidents belonging to the Al-Wefaq group. Nobody can say when relations between the Gulf and Lebanon will be restored.

In the meantime, rudderless Lebanon is on the brink of total economic and political collapse; no one should expect 2022 to be an easy year. Indeed, if the Lebanese State collapses, significant security challenges and vacuums will emerge with a resurgence of violent extremism, possible massive displacement of the population, internal civil war and heightened regional insecurity, including a renewed military confrontation with Israel.

Tunisia was the spark that triggered the so-called Arab Spring. And against great odds, such as political violence and a faltering economy, Tunisia was on the right track for a “happy transition,” drafting a constitution in 2014 and holding parliamentary elections in the same year. Observers and analysts used to label Tunisia as a success story of the Arab Spring. This idyllic vision came to an abrupt halt, on 25 July 2021, when President Kais Saied suspended the Parliament and dismissed the Prime Minister on the pretext that they had failed to eradicate the scourge of corruption. To many Tunisians, the decision was clearly a return to authoritarianism, and was seen as a “self-coup,” granting the President the power to rule by decree (22 September 2021) and concentrating all state powers in his hands.

Saied’s decisions were met by a wave of criticism in Tunisia and abroad. Bowing to pressures (mainly from the EU), Saied promised to end the emergency powers and restore Tunisia’s democratic order, announcing, on 13 December 2021, that Tunisia would hold a referendum on 25 June 2022 to amend the Constitution, ahead of parliamentary elections on 17 December 2022.

The announcement did nothing to assuage the fears of Tunisians, who have seen how his new rubber-stamp government “has abused counterterrorism laws to stifle dissent,”\(^6\) suppressed freedom of speech and cracked down on opponents, arresting former ministers (Noureddine Bhiri, the former Minister of Justice, and Fathi Beldi, a former official from the Interior Ministry) and even high-profile figures (including Rachid Ghannouchi, the Speaker of Parliament and President of Ennahda).

Once seen as the paradigm of a happy revolution, Tunisia is slowly backsliding into harsher controls over the society, without addressing its economic woes. The real objective of the President is not to fight corruption but to clip the wings of the Islamist movement – Ennahda – in Tunisia. Proof of that is the support he received from Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, all known for their entrenched hatred of “political Islam.”

Geopolitical Shifts of Alliances

2021 was a year that saw the acceleration of the arms race, including unmanned weapons, complicating the regional security dynamics. But it has also been marked by tensions being de-escalated, rifts healed and the rebuilding of working relations among regional actors.

Reconciliation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia

Qatar’s quick embrace of the “Arab Spring,” through the wide coverage of protests by the Al-Jazeera chan-

\(^5\) https://books.openedition.org/ifpo/13210  
nel, put the country at loggerheads with its fellow partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain accused Qatar of directly intervening in support of the Muslim Brotherhood, thereby undermining regional security. In 2014, the three countries withdrew their ambassadors from Doha and in June 2017 they imposed a land and air blockade on the country. Egypt followed suit and severed diplomatic ties with Qatar. The blockade lasted four years from 2017 until 2021. Never before has the GCC suffered such a dramatic setback. Qatar weathered the storm, exhibiting great resilience, but it had to scale down its tone. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates emphasized, in 2021, the need to "turn the page," to heal the wound and to handle the conflict through dialogue. Saudi Arabia invited Qatar to the 41st GCC summit, in Al-Ula (5 January 2021). The six members of the GCC signed the Al-Ula declaration, putting an end to the crisis. The declaration affirmed the need to "enhance unity and cohesion among the countries of the Cooperation Council and to return the joint action of the Gulf to its natural course and maintain security and stability in the region."

There were multiple reasons for healing the rift with Qatar. Saudi Arabia felt wary of the new American President, who warned that the US, under his leadership, will revise its relations with Saudi Arabia. By re-integrating Qatar into the GCC, Saudi Arabia was trying to avoid pressures from the new US Administration. On the other hand, the cost of the pandemic, the protracted war in Yemen and Iran's new assertiveness forced Saudi Arabia and the Emirates to adopt a less aggressive policy.

**De-escalation between Saudi Arabia and Iran**

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have rarely been smooth and cordial. Both countries scrambled to increase their influence and their clout at the regional level, competing for the symbolic leadership of the Islamic world (Sunniism versus Shi'ism or Islamist activism versus a conservative interpretation of Islam). Mounting tensions between conservative Saudi Arabia and "revolutionary Iran" took a dramatic turn with the killing of more than 400 Iranian pilgrims in Mecca, in 1987.

In the war between Iraq and Iran in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia sided with Saddam Hussein, not out of love, but for pragmatic reasons, as this meant weakening both countries, each of which posed a security challenge for the survival of the monarchy. Relations improved slightly in the late 1990s. Hassan Rouhani, Iran's then National Security Chief, and the late Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz, then the Saudi Interior Minister, signed a security agreement, "pledging not to interfere in each other's internal affairs."

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011, relations deteriorated dramatically due to the Saudi monarchy's sense of insecurity in the face of mounting popular uprisings. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of fuelling the protests and establishing a network of proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The Houthi takeover of Sanaa' in Yemen, in 2014, was considered by the Saudis as the "straw that broke the camel's back." The Saudis perceived the rise of this "Shiite" pro-Iranian group as a significant security threat, prompting the Kingdom to set up a military coalition, in 2015, in support of the legitimate Government of Yemen.

It is in this context of Saudi-Iranian rivalry that the first Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) was signed in 2015. Saudi Arabia and Israel lobbied heavily against the deal. Later, in 2018, both countries applauded Trump's withdrawal from the deal and his Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. In 2016, diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran were severed, after Iranian protesters in Tehran stormed the Saudi Embassy. The riots were sparked by the execution of Nimr al Nimr, a respected Saudi Shiite cleric.

The war in Yemen produced a severe humanitarian disaster but no victory for the Saudi-led coalition. On the contrary, not only did the Houthis resist the military campaign, but they even upgraded their military capabilities with advanced long-distance missiles and drones targeting civilian and economic infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Direct precision attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais, in 2019, have revealed the Kingdom's vulnerable security, but also the US's unwillingness to respond to what the Saudis saw as direct Iranian attacks.

Against this background of a changing balance of power and the US's apparent "disengagement," Saudi Arabia and the Emirates sought to ease tensions with Iran. With Iran severely hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Emirates sent medical aid to their neigh-
bour, while Saudi Arabia cautiously reopened discreet security channels.

For Saudi Arabia, regional geopolitics is a crucial factor. The Kingdom perceives Iran as an external and domestic threat. Externally, Iran threatens its regional sphere of influence by encircling the Kingdom to the north and south via its Iraqi and Houthi proxies. Internally, the Kingdom fears Iranian meddling through the incitement of the Saudi Shia minority in the oil-rich east of the Kingdom. Bahrain shares the same concern as a significant part of its population is also Shia. However, both countries tend to overstate the extent of Iranian meddling, and overlook the legitimacy of unaddressed Shia grievances. The Emirates do not see Iran as an “internal threat” but mainly as an external one, linked to the historic Iranian occupation of three Emirati Islands (Abu Musa and Great and Lesser Tunbs), Iranian support of the Houthis in Yemen and Iranian attacks on vessels in Emirati waters. Despite the bitter rivalry between the two countries, Saudi and Iranian security officials engaged in dialogue in April 2021, which was followed by a meeting of foreign ministers in Baghdad in August 2021. Since then, there have been four rounds of talks aimed at de-escalating tensions. But the fifth round, due to take place on 16 March 2022, was suspended following Saudi Arabia’s execution of 81 men over what it called “allegiance to foreign terrorist organizations and holding deviant beliefs.” Half of the executed men were “Shia” from the eastern Saudi region of Qatif, which has historically been a flashpoint between the Sunni Saudi Monarchy and its Shia minority. This clearly shows the fragility of the diplomatic normalization process.

**Turkey’s Return to Diplomacy**

Since 1950, Turkey has been firmly anchored in the Western camp, becoming a member of the Council of Europe in 1950 and NATO in 1952. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey had assumed a dual role as a “pro-Western pivot” in the volatile region of the Middle East, and as a “buffer” preventing the Soviet Union from leapfrogging into the Arab region where the West had vested interests, ranging from the protection of Israel to the control of Arab oil resources. Yet, in spite of being firmly anchored in the Western alliance, Turkish national security policy continued to be influenced by what is known as the Sèvres Syndrome,” i.e., “the conviction that the external world is trying to weaken and divide Turkey.” This explains, to a large extent, why successive Turkish governments have taken such a strong stance against Kurdish nationalist claims.

The electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), in 2002, transformed Turkish foreign policy. In the 2000s, the AKP focused on its immediate neighbourhood – the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia and, mainly, the Middle East – with the aim of fostering inter-regional relations based on dialogue and cooperation. This new policy orientation has been synthesized by the former Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, in the motto “zero problems with neighbours.” And indeed, Turkey repaired its relations with all its neighbours and often acted as mediator. The AKP was lauded as “a model” of Islamic democracy. And Turkey became an important trading partner, as an exporter-importer of energy resources and as an investor.

The Arab Spring in 2010 marked a momentous reversal of Turkey’s “Ring of Friends policy,” as Ankara embraced the uprisings and applauded the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in elections in Egypt (the Morsi Presidency), Tunisia (Ennahda’s victory in the parliamentary elections) and Morocco (the Justice and Development Party’s victory in the 2011 elections). In some cases, Turkey engaged militarily in support of protesters (in Syria) or to shore up the Government of National Accord in Libya. And when President Morsi was ousted by a military coup in Egypt, Turkey condemned the coup and was fiercely critical of al-Sisi. This spate of Turkish moves soured relations with many Arab countries that regarded the Arab Spring protests as an existential threat to their stability and to the regimes’ survival, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the Emirates. The rift produced new alignments: Turkey and Qatar sided with the Muslim Brotherhood while Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates closed ranks with Israel, Greece, Cyprus and even the Palestinian Authority. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul further embittered relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the two countries later supporting opposing sides in the Syrian conflict.

Relations between Turkey and Israel were no better. They soured after the incident of the Turkish ship, Mavi Marmara, which was heading to Gaza when Israeli commandos intercepted it in international wa-
The return to soft diplomacy, is a good omen for a better regional future

In early 2021, it was with great anguish that President Erdogan noted Turkey’s loneliness. It was clear that that country’s coercive diplomacy had not paid off. Consequently, he decided to change course and reach out to neighbours, rivals and adversaries. He received Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed; he pledged to restore ties with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Armenia; he received the Israeli President; and, more recently, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022), he proved to be a loyal member of NATO in his attempts to mediate between Russia and Ukraine by organizing a meeting between their respective foreign affairs ministers and striving to organize a face-to-face meeting between the presidents of Russia and Ukraine.

A new regional dynamic has been set in motion. Whether it will wipe out a decade of distrust remains to be seen.

Conclusion

In the IEMed Yearbook 2014, the organization’s Executive President, Senen Florensa, wrote a long essay titled “Transitions and Regional Geopolitics in the Arab World,” in which he analysed, with great clarity and expertise, the evolution of the Arab state system and the changing geopolitical dynamics between 1945 and 2014.

This article updates Senen Florensa’s 2014 essay and offers a critical assessment of the geopolitical events, trends, shifts and fractures in the post-Arab Spring. I do share Florensa’s analysis that “there have been successive waves of democratization in the world…there is no reason that the Arab world will be a permanent exception”… but “in the short and even medium term, many of them (Arab countries) may encounter great resistance, conflict and suffering.” And indeed, the first part of this article carries the title “the bitter harvest of the first decade of the post-Arab Spring (2010-2020).” I could have titled it the “unfulfilled promises of the Arab Spring,” not to infer that the Arab Spring has been a failure, in se, but that the Arab Spring has been hijacked, confiscated and perverted by reactionary forces, which have reverted to repressive methods and authoritarian control. Even in Tunisia, where the Arab Spring was triggered, there has been a backsliding to authoritarianism since 2021.

The second part of the article looks at events and trends of the last two years – 2020 and 2021. It analyses major events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and its political, social and economic impact; Trump’s Deal of the Century as a means to bury the Palestinian question; the Abraham Accords and their impact on regional dynamics; the fourth Hamas-Israel war in Gaza; and the geopolitical fractures in the Middle East and North Africa. This part concludes with a short analysis of the shifting alliances in the Middle East and North Africa, the regional rifts that have emerged and, finally, the return to soft diplomacy, which is a good omen for a better regional future.