

ALLIANCES IN THE POST-2011 MIDDLE EAST

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Over the decades, the Middle East has offered an intriguing case for international relations scholars, who found in the region a rich pool of puzzles to test hypotheses and advance theoretical innovations about alliance politics.¹ The 2011 Arab uprisings have certainly not turned the Middle East into a less turbulent region. The uprisings and their aftermath not only challenged the resilience of authoritarian regimes, but also had momentous effects on international relations in the region. As authoritarian regimes adjusted to the seismic shifts caused by the uprisings, alliance commitments shifted, new actors emerged, and the regional structure transformed. These dynamics have shaken the system of regional alliances as states have tried to adjust to drastic changes in their regional environment.² Post-2011 alliances have not only been characterized by anomalous shifts but also proved unchangingly ephemeral, individualist, and opaque. How do we make sense of alliance patterns in the post-2011 Middle East?

Continuities in apparent structural changes

The question of how patterns of alliances in the post-2011 Middle East have been affected by the uprisings relate to the debate about change and continuity. Fred Halliday once remarked – albeit in the context of 9/11 – that “there are two predictable, and nearly always mistaken, responses to any great international upheaval: one is to say that everything has changed; and the other is to say that nothing has changed,”³ and he emphasised that there is a need for attention to both elements of continuities and changes. Along these lines, there is a need to cautiously identify both elements of change and continuity in the patterns of alliances.

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¹ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Powers Politics* (London, New York: Norton, 2001); Mark L. Haas, *The Clash of Ideologies: Middle Eastern Politics and American Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² F. Gregory Gause, 'Ideologies, Alignments, and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 03 (2017): 672–75; May Darwich et al., 'International Relations and Regional (In)Security', in *The Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research Since the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Marc Lynch, Jillian Schwedler, and Sean Yom (Oxford University Press, 2022), 86–106.

³ Fred Halliday, 'A New Global Configuration', in *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, ed. Ken Booth and Timothy Dunne (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 235.

While “fluid and shifting” patterns of informal alliances have been one of the enduring features of regional politics,⁴ the outbreak of wars and conflicts in the post-2011 Middle East has brought attention to the question of alliance cohesion. The endurance of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis through various turbulent changes in the region seems to be an outstanding element of continuity in regional politics. This axis, which emerged out of regional exigencies bringing both the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Syrian regime together since 1979, has endured several waves of changes in the Middle East, including the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the end of the Cold War and the Kuwait War (1990-91), the era of US hegemony, and the Arab uprisings. With the outbreak of Syria’s civil war after 2011, Iran and Hezbollah saw in the fall of the Assad regime an existential threat to their survival in a rather hostile regional environment. On the one hand, Israel considers Iran and its allies a threat to its security. On the other, so-called “moderate” Arab states in alliance with the US, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, have allied against Iran and its seemingly aggressive expansion in the region through the support of various proxies. The alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah has only increased in cohesion to save the regime in Syria from falling. Even Hamas, whose drift from the axis in early 2012 initially seemed to shake the axis’ cohesion, is now returning to the fold of the axis and reviving ties with Syria and Iran.

The rifts within the Gulf Cooperation Council over competing strategies in regional wars including Syria and Libya and the subsequent reconciliation present another fascinating element of continuity in alliance patterns in the region. Despite competition and rivalry between Gulf monarchies in Syria, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, which culminated in the Qatar crisis (the UAE and Saudi Arabia isolating Qatar 2017-2020), the alliance among this group of monarchies seems to be returning to its usual dynamics. The structure that shaped the pre-2011 Middle East appears to be dominating some of today’s dynamics, and some patterns of alliances may seem to be persistent despite civil wars, insurgencies and change in the regional balance of power.

Uncertainty in a changing region

Despite apparent elements of continuity, patterns of alliances have also revealed subtle changes and nuances in the international dynamics of the Middle East. An intriguing element of change in the post-2011 alliances is the rise of armed non-state actors, not only as proxies to regional powers but as autonomous, significant players pursuing independent agendas through allying with states and other non-state actors. Non-state actors seemed a phenomenon that characterized many pre-2011 Middle East dynamics. Since the establishment of the Kurdish Regional Governments (KRG) in 1992 and the consolidation of its military Peshmerga, especially after 2003, the Iraqi Kurds have conducted a coherent foreign policy at regional and international levels.⁵ Hamas and Hezbollah are other cases of non-state actors who have relentlessly adopted a multi-faceted foreign policy in navigating regional and world politics. The breakdown of several Arab states after 2011 has led to an unprecedented increase in the

⁴ Curtis Ryan, ‘Shifting Alliances and Shifting Theories in the Middle East’, POMEPS Studies, *Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, March 2019.

⁵ Michael M. Gunter, ‘The Kurds in the Changing Political Map of the Middle East’, *Kurdish Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 64–81.

number of non-state actors in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Furthermore, Hezbollah has become a patron of other non-state actors in the region: conducting military operations in Iraq and Yemen, launching a military intervention to save the Assad regime in Syria, and leading a confrontation against the Gulf states.

With this unprecedented proliferation of armed non-state actors in the region, the uprisings seem to drive important changes in the nature of the state and its role at regional levels. Despite its artificial inception and its puzzling survival throughout the 20th century, the Arab State is challenged in the post-2011 period and its vulnerabilities have been exposed. From the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria, and Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, to the secessionist al-Hirak in southern Yemen and separatists in Libya, political actors across the region are mounting claims to states of their own. While the uprisings may have triggered the weakening and collapse of Arab states, changes at regional and international levels created permissive conditions to challenge the state system in the region. The post-2011 Middle East state system is rather evolving as both *de jure* and *de facto* actors are in constant negotiations over the revised map of the region and its new political order.

Another element of change is the United States' increasing disengagement from direct involvement in the Middle East. While the US was the hegemon in the Middle East from the end of the Cold War, US policy in the region after 2011 has been shaped by confusion and selectivity toward the Middle East, which sent signals to regional actors of US hegemonic retreat. The high bill of the 2003 Iraq War, the cost of the intervention in Libya in 2011, the fear of bearing the costs of conflicts between regional actors, and the involvement in protracted civil wars are all factors that contributed to the change in US policies in the Middle East. US hegemonic retreat was manifest in the US' lack of support and protection to some long-standing allies during the 2011 uprisings, such as Mubarak in Egypt. Furthermore, its hesitation to take a firm stand against Syria's Assad was another major decision that marked a change in the US' role in the region, inviting regional actors to play a more assertive part. This development provided opportunities for powerful outside actors, including Russia and China, to increase their presence in the region and position themselves as alternative partners and patrons.

In this changing regional environment, state and non-state actors have been trying to navigate uncertainty through consolidating old alliances and forging new ones to preserve themselves in the face of threats and/or increase their power. Alliances in the Middle East have always been characterized as puzzling and baffling. Rivals share common enemies, and allies often support different sides of the same conflict. Unimaginable partnerships and alliances emerge between opposing forces. The 2011 uprisings and their aftermath have only made the regional environment more uncertain and highly volatile. The insecurity and uncertainty are the main drivers in alliance decisions and choices of friends and enemies. These alliances may (or may not) alter some of the enduring features of regional politics. Yet, during these momentous changes, elements of continuity are also evident.