

ORDER AND DISORDER IN THE SHADOW OF OCTOBER 7TH

ARTICLE

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On the first official state visit of his second term in office, Donald Trump once again visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Along with a delegation of senior administration figures and prominent business people, Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, followed swiftly by trips to Qatar and the UAE, reflected the shifting contours of regional politics. The day after his delegation landed, Trump posed for official photographs with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and interim President Ahmed al Sharaa of Syria. Trump had agreed to lift sanctions on Syria, proclaiming "the things I do for the Crown Prince." The trip came at a sensitive time in regional affairs. The destruction of Gaza continues at pace, south Lebanon — including parts of the capital Beirut — have been destroyed, fighting in Syria has cost thousands of lives, and the world waits with bated breath to see if a nuclear deal can be reached with Iran.

Order in the Middle East across the past few decades has typically been forged through competition between blocs, between alliances that largely — though not exclusively — coalesced around Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively. These alliances were forged through shared values, security concerns, and visions of order, often underscored by sectarian affinity. The decade after the Arab Uprisings was largely characterised by rivalry between the broadly conservative and status quo-driven alliance of Gulf monarchies, the broadly revolutionary bloc often referred to as the axis of resistance, and a loose alliance between Turkey and Qatar. Across this period, competing visions of regional order emanating from these capitals reverberated across the Middle East. Yet these blocs were not ideologically consistent. Nor did they move in union, reflecting the broader messiness of order and its discontents, along with the contrasting ways in which identity, religion, economics, security, and the role of external powers are seen.

At the same time as these dynamics play out between states, new divisions have started to emerge that point at tensions between rulers and ruled, and an ongoing desire to bring about an alternative way of ordering life in the region. The protests of 2019 in Iraq and Lebanon for example were driven by calls for a dramatic and existential change in the ways in which sectarian groups shaped daily life. Amidst chants of *kellon yani kellon* (All of them means all of them) and *nurid watan* (We want a homeland), people called for change. In response, those in positions of power embarked on counter-revolutionary processes seeking to retain their positions of power and influence, doubling down on the very principles that had played such a dominant role in ordering life, often supported with violence.

Ultimately, these dynamics did little to enact a substantive change in the characteristics of regional order, though they did point to underlying political, social and economic issues which also were prevalent in the Arab Uprisings. The outbreak of Covid-19 negatively impacted their progress, but the pandemic also highlighted many of the underlying issues long prevalent in regional order and security calculations. Both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia blamed the spread of Covid-19 onto their shores on citizens who had illegally visited Iran.

By 2023, dynamics had begun to shift substantially. The Saudi-Iranian normalisation agreement restored diplomatic relations between the two states and pointed to an alternative way of doing regional politics predicated on mutual interest. At the heart of this were economic factors with Saudi Arabia cognizant that regional stability was essential to enact Vision 2030 while Iran required a large injection of capital to stimulate a flagging economy. Later that year, rumours of Saudi Arabia formally recognising the State of Israel began to circulate. Yet the devastating terror attacks of October 7th and Israel's ensuing destruction of Gaza ended talk of normalisation.

The early months of 2023 had promised much, perhaps best captured in the normalisation of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, as the year drew to a close, the ordering principles that had shaped regional politics over the past decade appeared in tatters. While the underlying currents for such discontent were latent, Hamas' brutal attacks of October 7th and Israel's devastating bombardment of Gaza served as the catalyst for such deterioration. Later in the year, Saudi Arabia also engaged in diplomatic processes with Israel — a significant step — and the Houthis in Yemen, seeking to end conflict on the Kingdom's southern border, yet both ultimately proved unsuccessful. The aftermath of October 7th made normalisation between Saudi and Israel untenable in the immediate future. Similarly, diplomatic overtures with the Houthis failed to reach a lasting agreement, despite seemingly ending the violence.

Amidst an increasingly febrile environment, Israel and Iran engaged in tit for tat strikes, including the killing of Hamas leaders in Tehran and strikes across Iran, and reciprocal strikes on targets across Israel, contributing to growing anger across the region. Many generated support through their opposition to Israeli actions in Gaza. Hizballah, the Lebanese Party of God, launched attacks on Israeli targets on October 8th in solidarity with Palestinians and Hamas, an approach taken in line with their 'resistance' ideology. These actions provoked a fierce response. Attacks on Hizballah targets across Lebanon, including the infamous 'pager attacks', missile strikes and a land invasion, led to the decapitation of the Party of God's senior leadership, including the death of Hassan Nasrallah. Yet Hizballah's opposition to Israel began to shift the contours of politics in Lebanon, with expressions of support from erstwhile Hizballah rivals, including armed groups from the Sunni community.

Later that year, the Houthis began attacking global shipping routes through the Red Sea in support of the Palestinian cause, provoking the new Trump Administration in the US to order a military response on targets across Yemen. In comments made on Truth Social, Trump told the

Houthis that “HELL WILL RAIN DOWN” on them if attacks continued. He also warned Iran to stop supporting the Houthis, stressing that “America will hold you full accountable and, we won’t be nice about it.”

The rapid fall of Bashar al Assad in Syria — ending over 60 years of Ba’athist rule in the country in the process — resulted in the emergence of a new government under the rule of Ahmed Al Sharaa, the leader of HTS and a former member of the Al Qa’ida-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra. While Syrians celebrated the fall of Al Assad, members of Alawite communities — those previously associated with the Al Assad regime — became increasingly fearful amidst rising instances of violence against them. Across the coast, particularly around Latakia, attacks on Alawite communities under the banner of purging ‘regime remnants’ resulted in thousands of deaths. At the same time, Israeli attacks on targets across Syria continued, ostensibly to prevent caches of weapons from falling into ‘the wrong hands’, but seemingly also as part of wider efforts to create a buffer zone. The ensuing lifting of sanctions on Syria and the reintegration of Damascus into the regional fold seemingly legitimises the rule of the interim government.

There is little doubt that the Middle East is in the midst of a transformational moment, with Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iran all facing uncertain futures. The question of Gaza and the ‘day after’ continues to be unresolved, despite the mounting diplomatic and legal pressure on Israel. The conflict in Yemen continues, albeit with Israeli and US strikes on Houthi targets rather than Saudi strikes. Lebanon continues to suffer from Israeli strikes while trying to rebuild its economy and infrastructure. Syria has entered a period of transition while navigating the complexity of truth and reconciliation, rehabilitation, violence, collective trauma, and more.

Writing in *The Prison Notebooks*, the Italian Philosopher Antonio Gramsci observed that “[t]he crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”. When looking at the Middle East it is hard not to identify with this statement. The old order across the Middle East appears to be dying, much to the chagrin of many who fight for its survival, yet the new order cannot be born. The interregnum that order in the Middle East finds itself in is such that a wide range of morbid symptoms have emerged, symptoms which have had a devastating impact on life across the region.