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THE REALIGNMENT OF THE MIDDLE EAST

LIOR STERNFELD



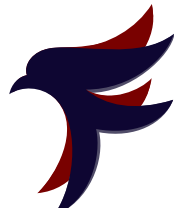


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The Realignment of the Middle East

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About the Author

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Executive Summary

In the Middle East, reality can change in the blink of an eye. Misconceptions and misrepresentations that dominate the public discourse have it that the region has been embroiled in war since time immemorial. Still, even its most recognizable conflict—the Israel-Palestine dispute—has been going on for only a century. This report will not focus on the history of that conflict but instead will try to analyze the realignment of the key players in the region and beyond and point out several pathways to build on in securing peace.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been the sole global superpower. The change in world politics and the demise of the Soviet Union did not end the perception of alliances as zero-sum games. The War on Terror, the debacle of Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of movements such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the Arab Spring, and the collapse of old state structures, somehow fortified this approach over a more nuanced and pragmatic approach. Since the early 1990s, China entered as a secondary force and slowly gained a different status. This report examines the changes the Chinese doctrine might bring to the geopolitics in the region. Furthermore, it will examine the role China has played in the reshaping of the Middle East as a multipolar region, the transformation in the American role, and identify areas where the United States can take advantage of the new multipolarity in the region in light of Chinese activity.

Introduction

On December 9, 1987, the First Intifada broke out when an Israel Defense Forces truck collided with a Palestinian car in the Jabalia refugee camp in the Gaza Strip and killed four of its passengers. The response, fueled by the frustration of the twenty years since the 1967 occupation, was a call for a widespread uprising, throwing stones

and Molotov cocktails at the Israeli Defense Force patrols, checkpoints, and soldiers and strikes throughout the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. For the first time since 1967, the Israeli public realized that the occupation, the trips to the cheap markets of Ramallah, Jenin, Nablus, and Gaza, and the cheap workforce of the Palestinian workers who were most of the construction workforce in Israel, all came with a price. During the First Intifada, a four-year period from 1987 to 1991, about 200 Israelis and almost 2,000 Palestinians died.

But how did the First Intifada end? Those were the days of the end of the Cold War and immediately following the first Gulf War. President George H.W. Bush wanted to take advantage of the international coalition that included, in addition to the United States and the Soviet Union, many Arab countries that fought Saddam Hussain's Iraq, and made a breakthrough in the peace process in Israel-Palestine that had stalled since the 1979 accord with Egypt. The United States remained the last standing global superpower, enjoying the hegemonic prestige and the goodwill of many countries and institutions. The success of the military campaign in Kuwait and Iraq (and the isolation of Iraq and the Palestine Liberation Organization as its ally), gave significant leverage to the winning coalition in the push for a major political breakthrough. Bush announced the convening of a peace conference in Madrid, to the chagrin of Yitzhak Shamir, the Israeli prime minister of the Likud Party. Shamir initially refused to join. Bush threatened to withhold a \$400 million loan guarantee that Israel needed to absorb the million Jews coming from the Soviet Union.¹ When Israel assessed the American threat was real, Shamir immediately complied, and the Israeli delegation (which included Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) appeared in Madrid and started direct peace talks with all the neighboring Arab countries, including the Palestinians.

The conference *de facto* ended the Intifada. The mere fact that Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met to attempt to find a permanent solution to this conflict was enough to end the violence. Recently, testimonies of Israeli Defense Force soldiers who



Palestinian rioters confronting security forces, at "Ayosh" Junction, near Ramallah, 2000. (Nadav Ganot/Wikimedia Commons)

served in Gaza during the Intifada have surfaced (with the release of a new song, “Waltz with Shaanan” by the Israeli hip hop group *HaDag Nahash*) recounting that with the opening of the Madrid Conference, the Palestinian masses took to the streets and showered the Israeli Defense Force soldiers with rice and sweets.² These were the same people that earlier threw stones and Molotov cocktails at them.

The Madrid conference and the public debate that followed led to the political upset in the June 1992 elections in Israel, in which the Labor Party, with Yitzhak Rabin at the top of its list, was able to form a center-left-wing coalition (the Arab parties in the Knesset supported the coalition in the chamber but did not officially join the coalition) with the declared goal of making peace (as vaguely as it was laid out). A year later, secret negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization led to the signing of the Oslo Accords, which formally ended the Intifada, established the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, and aimed at establishing a Palestinian state by 1999.

The Palestinian state, of course, was never

established. Hope turned into despair, which led to the Second Intifada (2000 to 2005), with a death toll of over 1,000 Israelis and more than 3,000 Palestinians.³ In an attempt to solve, once and for all, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in March 2002, the Arab League put forth the most grandiose peace plan titled “The Arab League Peace Initiative,” which very simply promised the normalization of ties between Israel and all the Arab League member states immediately following the establishment of the Palestinian state along the borders of June 4, 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.⁴ The plan has been ratified many times since but never came up seriously in Israeli public discourse. After the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005, Gaza descended into Israeli oblivion—seventeen years of rocket shelling, mostly on Israeli towns and agricultural settlements in the Gaza envelope (a district in southern Israel bordering the Gaza Strip, where tens of cities, towns, Kibbutzim, and Moshavim are all within around four miles from Gaza), a violent takeover by Hamas, fifteen years of siege, and repeating rounds of fighting that led to a permanent humanitarian crisis, on par with the worst the world witnessed in the twenty-first century.

Israel and Palestine in the Twenty-First Century

The Middle East has undergone tremendous changes in the past three decades. Since the early 1990s and the end of the Cold War, the United States has found itself to be the only superpower in the world and shaped its doctrine accordingly. The era of the presidency of George W. Bush and his post-9/11 policies and the War on Terror changed the calculus in the region. Israel's position as a main US ally was cemented, and the region was divided again in a zero-sum game between US allies and foes (chiefly Iraq and Iran). This time, in sharp contrast to the Cold War, US adversaries had no superpower patron.

The United States and its global portfolio of interests included the Iranian nuclear issue, the War on Terror (which was later expanded to include campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), containing the impact of the collapse of key states following the Arab Spring (i.e., Syria, Libya, and Yemen), economic development, and rearranging pacts of “moderate states” and Israel as a formula for stability. All these are intertwined. The alliance of cooperation of the moderate Arab states was needed to coordinate a united front against the Iranian nuclear project. The War on Terror removed barriers for totalitarian Arab regimes in methods of counter-terrorism at home (very loosely defined). For that, many of them were happy to use Israeli technologies.⁵ Saudi Arabia supported moving forward with the normalization, but until last year, the official traditional stand was that it should not happen until the Israel-Palestine conflict was resolved. Following this story, we see that in the first twenty years of the century, the American and anti-American blocs were shaped with Iran as the major force behind it.

Four years passed between Israel's deadliest war with Egypt in 1973 and the Egyptian president's visit to Israel in 1977. Days and weeks passed between lethal clashes in the First Intifada and the warm embrace following the Madrid

conference. In 2010, Mossad agents allegedly assassinated the Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in Dubai and subsequently cut off all (informal) ties with Israel. The Dubai police chief, Khalfan Tamim, famously threatened to issue an arrest warrant to the eleven Mossad agents who were part of that operation and against Meir Dagan, the then-head of the Mossad. Tamim even stated that he would deport anyone who looked Israeli.⁶ Less than a decade later, the United Arab Emirates is a close regional ally of Israel and the driving party behind the Abraham Accords. In the Middle East, things can change very quickly.

Post-Cold War and China Behind the Scenes

China first turned its attention to the region in the 1960s as Mao Zedong was promoting his Third World ideology and supporting anti-imperialist struggles worldwide. Then, a decade later, as Sino-Soviet relations soured, China feared a Soviet takeover of the Gulf, prompting it to support the US-backed Twin Pillar status quo of Iran and Saudi Arabia (i.e., a policy led by the United States placing Saudi Arabia and the Shah's Iran as key allies to secure the oil supply).⁷ Throughout the 1970s, China established relations with Kuwait and Iran, then with Oman.⁸ Since the 1970s, China had been steadily expanding its diplomatic ties with countries in the region. By 1997, it had already signed “High-Level Consultation Agreements” with Turkey, Cyprus, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, Israel, Egypt, and Kuwait.⁹ In the 1990s, the Gulf's importance for China increased because of its rising domestic oil demand.¹⁰

Since the mid-1990s, China has been reassessing its place within the changing Middle East. The heightened interest was in part driven by China's growing domestic consumption of oil, which turned it from a net exporter to a net importer in 1993, motivating China to expand its oil interests in the Gulf. For example, in 1993 the four biggest oil suppliers to China included Oman and Yemen, whereas by 2003, Saudi Arabia and Iran had



Duqm refinery in Oman. (Abdullah AlManni/Wikimedia Commons)

joined the list of principal suppliers.¹¹ As the region gained importance to China's economy, government-established Middle Eastern studies institutions undertook initiatives on great-power competition in the region. In 1997, after noting that "big powers, such as the United States, Russia, and France are intensifying competition over influence in the Middle East,"¹² China signed five-year bilateral trade agreements with Turkey, Cyprus, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, Egypt, and Kuwait.

By 1997 China had signed economic and technical agreements with Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority, and held joint commission meetings on economic, scientific, and technological cooperation with Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Saudi, and Oman. It also signed direct oil import agreements with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.¹³ In a memo detailing the further relations with West Asia and North Africa, the Chinese Communist Party noted that "[O]n the issue of human rights, states in this region hold the same position as our country: firmly oppose foreign powers using human rights to intervene in

domestic politics. In the fifty-third United Nations Human Rights Council, Egypt, Algeria, and Sudan supported China's veto as members of the committee."¹⁴

This sums up the appeal of China as a superpower for many of the Middle East and North African countries. China was on the verge of its tremendous economic growth, and the region offered many opportunities for that development. The Chinese categories would look very different from American lists of countries and interests. For example, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan were all part of the same list. At the same time, Iran had already been targeted by US sanctions for almost two decades, and US-Sudan relations were very rocky throughout the 1990s.

The Chinese strategy, which remained pretty consistent, was that the "Cold War mentality" exercised by the United States was futile. However, the road to achieving a multipolar balance was still a long one. The Chinese Yellow Book of 2003 to 2004 stated that "the current world is still one great power and multiple big powers, and there are probably no fundamental



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken tours the Imam Al-Tayeb Mosque at the Abrahamic Family House, in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, October 14, 2023. (US State Department/Chuck Kennedy)

changes in the foreseeable future. The development of a multipolar world, although the end of the Cold War provided the conditions for it, will take a long time.”¹⁵

Over the next two decades, China implemented a comprehensive policy of investment and development that facilitated its unprecedented growth and expanded its foothold in other regions (Asia and Africa, primarily). Investment in infrastructure, energy, railroads, ports, industrial complexes, technologies, and more turned China into a viable alternative to the economic support traditionally provided by the United States. In 2009, China was a founding member in forming BRIC (later BRICS: a grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as the rival bloc to the Group of Seven. In the summer of 2023, the BRICS announced the forthcoming addition of Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, though the most recent presidential elections in Argentina put its membership in doubt. However, the outreach is not limited to the countries that turned their back on the United States. All these diplomatic,

economic, and geopolitical initiatives help China maintain access and working relations with all the regional actors. In 2014, as part of a seminar hosted by the Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University, Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmi, said “Egypt hopes China becomes a reliable partner: not only in economy but also international politics; Egypt hopes the powers in the world system become more balanced and the world system can be pushed from balance of power to balance of interest in a mutually dependent world.”¹⁶ Egypt is one of the biggest recipients of US aid.

Throughout this period, China has been eyeing the progress and policies enacted by India. Participation in the I2U2 initiative (India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States), along with India’s Link West, bringing them closer to the Gulf states and pushing them further from Pakistan, was seen in Beijing as a way to: create a US-led cooperation with United Arab Emirates finance, Israeli technology, and Indian cheap labor, to serve US geopolitical interests in the Middle East and North Africa region, and prevent

Middle East and North Africa big powers and other big powers from undermining US interests.¹⁷ Simultaneously, China slowly enhanced its presence and political capital by signing energy deals with Iran, Russia, and Venezuela. Per *Reuters* reporting:

China's purchases are also a revenue lifeline for Moscow, Tehran and Caracas, whose economies are otherwise curtailed by Western sanctions and a decline in investment.

China shipped in a record 2.765 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude by sea from Iran, Russia and Venezuela in the first nine months of 2023, according to an average of data provided by tanker trackers Vortexa and Kpler.

The three countries accounted for a quarter of China's imports between January and September, up from about 21 percent in 2022 and double the 12 percent share in 2020, *Reuters'* analysis found, displacing alternatives from the Middle East, West Africa and South America."¹⁸

So, in one move, China gained cheaper oil and influence and access to three major regional players.

Iran: The Middle Power

Since 1979, Iran has positioned itself at the forefront of the anti-American struggle in the Middle East. As part of its professed doctrine, Iran supported organizations and states that facilitated Iran's goals in the region and beyond. Hizballah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Assad's Syria, and most recently the Houthis in Yemen are the protégés of Iran and collaborators on different fronts. However, Iran's goals have evolved since the revolution and have reflected the changing balance in the Middle East. When China was seen

as a force to counter the US sanctions regime, Iran turned China into a main trade partner, and this relationship constituted a lifeline to Iran. After the revolution, Iran sought to cement its position in the context of the struggles and wars in Lebanon and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Those were the policy openings available at the time. The war with Iraq (1980 to 1988) put it at odds with most of the Arab world.

After the war, during the presidencies of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989 to 1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997 to 2005), Iran tried to rebuild the country. The key was improving relations with the West. The change was seen in rhetoric and actions, but not in the form of a total surrender, as expected by the United States. After 9/11, Khatami condemned the attack in a series of open letters and diplomatic exchanges. On Sept. 12, 2001, he wrote in the Iranian newspaper, *Hamshahri*:

I condemn the terrorist attacks of hijacking airplanes and attacking public centers in American cities, which sent a large number of defenseless people to their deaths, and I express my sincere condolences to the American nation, especially to those impacted, and the families of the victims of this incident. Terrorism is condemned, and the international community must recognize its roots and dimensions and take fundamental steps to dry them out [eradicate them]. This is the principal intention of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and it will not refrain from [taking] any action to bring this Islamic and humane belief to realization.¹⁹

Similar messages were conveyed in interviews with CNN and other Western outlets and phone calls with other world leaders. The *New York Times* reported similar sentiments from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.²⁰

The American response came to be known as the "Axis of Evil speech," in which Bush grouped Iran together with North Korea and Iraq.²¹ Following

the American invasion of Afghanistan, Iran offered to assist the United States and the NATO allies in achieving stability in Afghanistan. In the heat of that crisis, Iran faced a serious challenge with millions of Afghan refugees crossing the borders into it.²² Perhaps out of fear that it would be next, Iran then expressed interest in assisting the United States in Iraq, as well.

This kind of change of direction could be seen in Iran's approach to the Arab League Peace Initiative. In 2005, when the Organization of Islamic Cooperation adopted the Arab League Peace Initiative, Iran abstained. Iran did not come in opposition to the initiative. It repeatedly argued across different administrations that if the Palestinian leadership agrees to the peace agreement with Israel, Iran will not carry the banner of the Palestinian struggle. It flirted with the idea even during Ahmadinejad's presidency, which was known as the most hostile Iranian administration to the United States and the West.²³

In 2013, Hassan Rouhani was elected Iranian president with a clear mandate to reach a nuclear agreement with the West. The nuclear deal would help to lift some of the sanctions and maybe lead the way to a more comprehensive overhaul of the US-Iran relations. The deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) was finally signed in 2015 and gave new wind to the power and prestige of diplomacy. Three years later, President Donald Trump pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and it appeared that a confrontation between Iran and the West was growing inevitable after the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, leader of Iran's vaunted Revolutionary Guard Corps. International observers noted that Iran resumed its nuclear activity and seemed to be lining up its regional allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen toward the escalation of the conflict with the US-supported countries in the Middle East.²⁴ As the war in Yemen intensified with Iranian and Saudi proxies, the direct confrontation also escalated with the Iranian drone and missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019.²⁵

The Emergence of the Multipolar Middle East

The Chinese doctrine of a multipolar Middle East, as mentioned above, became a tangible reality with Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia turning into middle powers, representing local and global interests. During the years of the war against the Islamic State, Russia and the United States asserted their regional strength, as did China during the nuclear negotiations.

In 2019, the China Institute for International Studies analyst Liu Chang noted that the US-Russia competition was reaching a cooling period in the interest of both sides. Iran and Saudi Arabia had exhausted their power. This understanding opened the door for China, as Iranian and Saudi leaders expressed willingness for dialogue. Liu identified a historic opportunity for China to exercise greater regional influence, as China has increased the number and intensity of Beijing-led multilateral regional dialogues in recent years.²⁶

Shortly after, in 2020, Trump launched his signature achievement in foreign policy, the Abraham Accords, which ushered in a series of normalization agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. This accord was the first major departure from the 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative. The deal was largely seen as the formation of the anti-Iran camp, but also demonstrated the benefits of belonging to the US alliance. The United Arab Emirates finalized a major arms deal, the headline of which was the acquisition of the F-35 fighter aircraft.²⁷ Morocco achieved the long-sought US recognition of its highly controversial sovereignty over Western Sahara,²⁸ and Sudan was removed from the terrorism-sponsoring states list.²⁹ Saudi Arabia stayed out of the initial deal but openly supported it. Additionally, it opened its airspace for Israeli airlines for the first time as a sign of progress in the normalization talks.³⁰ And so, a decade after the chief of Dubai's police vowed to prosecute the head of the Mossad and deport Israeli-looking tourists, the United Arab Emirates

became Israel's close regional ally.

The accords were largely seen as a way to counter and contain Iranian influence. The *Wall Street Journal*, for example, reported that:

Israel has relations with Egypt and Jordan, but the United Arab Emirates is the first Gulf Arab state to announce a formal bond with Israel. The Gulf Arab states have historically held off doing so amid Israel's long-running conflict with the Palestinians. In recent years, shared enmity with Iran has brought the sides closer together.³¹

In his speech in the Knesset, Netanyahu also presented the agreement as a way to spite Iran, which expressed its opposition to the diplomatic move.³²

In November 2020, Trump lost to Joe Biden who assumed office in January 2021. Later that year, Rouhani of Iran ended his second term with a harsh reality: The biggest diplomatic achievement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action vanished, sanctions were crippling the Iranian economy again, and COVID-19 was still raging. In the tightest election since 1979, only conservative and ultra-conservative candidates were cleared to run. Ibrahim Raisi, a former deputy prosecutor in Tehran during the 1988 mass executions of political prisoners, won the presidential election, and the clear message was that Iran was done with the reconciliation attempts.

China and the Middle East

Despite the optics of Iran and the US allies drifting away from one another during the Trump presidency and the withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, in China the observations were profoundly different. Teng Jianqun, a China Institute for International Studies analyst, estimated in September 2019 that "Saudi Arabia is not fully committed to the anti-Iran campaign."³³ This observation was crucial

to China's understanding of Middle Eastern geopolitics. While the negotiations leading to the Abraham Accords were taking place, China positioned itself as the mediator between Iran and other Gulf countries, chiefly among them Saudi Arabia. This intervention led to the restarting of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.

In August 2020, Liu Chang wrote:

One of the big motivations for some countries to get closer to Israel formally or informally is to combat Iran's increasing regional influence. It is widely believed that the United Arab Emirates and Israel's normalization will exert strategic pressure on Iran from the South and North ... how Iran would react could be the next big point to watch in the Middle East's geopolitical struggle. Moreover, behind the United Arab Emirates and Israel, there is the United States. Meanwhile, the US-Iran competition is increasingly the determining variable in situation/ (political) development in the Middle East: After Arab-Israel normalization, the geopolitical struggle between the United States and its alliance system and Iran and its proxy network will undoubtedly intensify.³⁴

This analysis stresses the pragmatic reasons for Iran and the Gulf countries to resolve old conflicts and applies the same logic to the Israeli-Arab parties in the Abraham Accords.

The key takeaway from this report has a lot to do with the role of pragmatism, ideas of prosperity, and the survival of regimes. Liu Chang saw the fluidity (as opposed to rigid) status of friend/enemy definitions in the Middle East:

But the most distinct characteristic of Middle East geopolitics is that despite the "camp" and "cold war" trend forming, the region is very

interdependent, and enemy-friend relations are always open to change at any time. [For example] regarding the UAE-Iran relation, not only did the relation become closer due to Covid diplomacy, but also the two countries recently seem to have reached some tacit agreement on the Yemen problem: that Iran ignores the Southern Transitional Council in exchange for Emirati government's tacit acknowledgment of Iran's control and Houthi's activities in the North—the two sides [with these tacit agreements] work to fulfill the vacuum created by Saudi's retreat. Looking deeper, we will find that Arab-Israel normalization might be not only that “the situation drives human decisions” but also an inevitable development of the Arab states. Since the Arab Spring, the effect of using the Palestinian issue to unify the Arab world has been increasingly weak; instead, each country is pursuing stability and development, with the primary concern being domestic stability, livelihood, and sovereignty. The increasing domestic-facing and pragmatic policies are making nationalism and nativism outweigh pan-Arabism; the speed at which citizens' loyalty to their own national sovereignty outweighs Arab identity [...] so, Arab-Israel normalization reveals the rise of nationalism and the losing power of the Arab identity, although this will still be a very long process.³⁵

The proverbial elephant in the room, following the Abraham Accords, is the Israel-Palestine conflict that remained unattended by design. Liu Chang wrote in December 2020:

Now the region's central conflict is shifting from the traditional Arab-Israeli conflict to US-led Israel and Gulf states confronting Iran and

Turkey ... Proxy wars continue to affect regional peace ... While the Palestinian question is watering down, it will not be forgotten, especially its ethical nature, which can still affect public opinion in Arab states. The Arab-Israel normalization is “elites are passionate, but the people are aloof.”³⁶

China has worked for over two decades to create a multi-power balance in the Middle East. This policy empowered middle powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Abraham Accords show that, after all, there are still advantages to belonging to the American camp (security guarantees, diplomatic achievements, and arms contracts). However, it can be argued that the “deals” were handed over because of the relatively stronger position of the middle powers. That kind of encouragement perhaps helped Saudi Arabia make another step toward normalization with Israel when, in September 2023, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced a deal was imminent and alluded that a Saudi nuclear plan would be the price. By doing that, Saudi Arabia buried the very same framework it created in 2002 with the Arab League Peace Initiative and was the last to uphold it, stipulating any additional progress with the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In an interview with the Lebanese channel *al-Mayadeen*, the deputy head of Hamas political bureau, Saleh al-Arouri, said that he was hoping that the Palestinian interest would prevail and there would be a change in the course of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia “as rumored.” Moreover, he said that the normalization with Saudi Arabia is not like any other country because of the alleged responsibility of Saudi Arabia over the Islamic holy spaces.³⁷

And then came October 7.

On October 7, 2023, the mere idea that the Palestinian issue could be placed on the back burner was put to rest. For years, Netanyahu and other Israeli officials argued that peace with the Palestinians would come after Israel had



Iran fans wear shirts displaying Freedom and Mahsa Amini inside the Al Thumama Stadium during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, November 29, 2022. (REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay)

normalized relations with the rest of the Arab world because then they would see that they had to settle for much less and climb down the tree of their territorial and other demands. On that day, Hamas led a coordinated attack on Israeli cities and agricultural communities (Kibbutzim and Moshavim) near the Gaza border. They kidnapped, raped, and slaughtered thousands of Israeli civilians (the death toll from October 7 itself was 1,200 dead, thousands wounded and treated for many physical injuries, and 241 were taken hostage).³⁸ The same day, Israel declared war against Hamas, which has already led to unprecedented devastation and a humanitarian crisis (as of late December the death toll in Gaza exceeded 20,000, with thousands still buried under the rubble, and 1.9 million internally displaced).

Iran's Domestic and Regional Challenges

On September 16, 2022, a twenty-two-year-old Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, died while in the custody of Gasht-e Ershad (the Guidance Patrol, also known as the morality police) for not wearing her head covering properly. Her death

sparked a wave of protest against the regime that lasted for six months and, at times, looked like it would be able to lead to a new revolution. In the aftermath of the protests, the regime loosened the enforcement of the hijab laws while trying to show no weakness in dealing with attempts to renew protests.³⁹

However, President Ebrahim Raisi knew how deeply unpopular he and the regime he led were among vast parts of Iranian society, and he had to find ways to defend the regime's important interests and ensure the structure's survival. The way to do it was to minimize conflicts with external players. Since the Mahsa Amini uprising was suppressed, the Raisi administration signaled it was willing to resume the nuclear negotiations. It opened a few channels with the West. Iran released American prisoners with dual citizenship in exchange for unfreezing Iranian assets and working on a new framework for the nuclear talks: Under the Chinese umbrella, Iran renewed diplomatic agreements with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain and signed a new twenty-five-year agreement with China.⁴⁰ Additionally, Iran was invited to join BRICS in the summer of 2024, as part of the first bloc expansion after its founding years 2009 to 2010. The expansion is evidence of Chinese expansion in the region and success in promoting its



An Israeli soldier looks through binoculars, as smoke rises above Gaza, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, in Southern Israel, December 18, 2023. (REUTERS/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

alternative to the US-led international institutions, as not only Iran but also the United Arab Emirates formally accepted the invitation, which, although not suggesting steering away from the US-led order, is certainly a sign of countries pursuing multi alignment strategy.

Despite a common public perception of Iran being behind the October 7 attacks, it was not in Iran's interest to plan or agree to this attack. While Iran notoriously bankrolls Hamas and other organizations, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hizballah in Lebanon, this attack was much more disruptive than not (while acknowledging the central role of the Palestinian struggle in the Iranian rhetoric and narrative). Some sources argued that Iran pushed to delay the attack until after the completion of the prisoner exchange deal with the United States and the unfreezing of \$6 billion in Iranian assets, while others argued that it was Iran's way to derail the Abraham Accords.⁴¹ It looks like Iran was perhaps as surprised as others by the attack's timing and scale. According to multiple reports, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, told Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in early November: "You gave us no warning of your October 7 attack

on Israel, and we will not enter the war on your behalf." The same reports hold that Hizballah had no knowledge of the attacks either.⁴²

On October 26, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian spoke at the United Nations and said that Iran is interested in preventing the situation from escalating further:

[C]ontinuing our recent efforts, we are ready to play a more serious role in this case. In that regard, the Hamas liberation movement announced their willingness to release the non-military hostages, and Iran, Turkey, and Qatar are ready to assume their role in this important humanitarian issue. Obviously, the release of 6,000 Palestinian prisoners from the occupying regime is also the responsibility of the United States.⁴³

One government that took this statement seriously was the government of Thailand, which used Iranian connections to secure the release of Thai citizens among the hostages.⁴⁴ Most

recently, on December 12, 2023, Amirabdollahian spoke at the United Nations in Geneva and said that Israel and the United States would never be able to wipe out Hamas, and that Israel could only secure the release of hostages held in Gaza with a political solution to the conflict.⁴⁵ One might consider that position to be pragmatism in action.

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War profoundly reshaped the geopolitics of the Middle East. The Soviet Union was gone and America became the hegemonic power. However, some things stayed the same. America and other regional states continued to ruthlessly advance their interests at the expense of rivals. Russia and China played different roles in the changing dynamics of the region. Arguably, the most successful push was turning the region into a multipolar theater. It gave greater power to local leaders and governments in negotiating their terms, even if, eventually, they remained within the same sphere of influence. China made inroads with countries allied with the United States (Egypt and Israel, for example) and made long-term partnerships with those that were not (most prominently, Iran). It allowed all actors to see the full scale of the benefit of belonging to one bloc or the other.

The United States traditionally viewed the region through the same Cold War lens. And that was also the logic at the basis of the Abraham Accords. China's perspective of leading to a more layered approach allowed it to bring reconciliation between Iran and its neighbors (even if for instrumental reasons only). In that spirit, it is imperative to read what Yao Jinxiang (Tsinghua University) wrote in late 2019:

China is not an observer of Middle Eastern security issues but a trustworthy partner. The Israeli-Palestinian question is the root cause of Middle Eastern (lack of) peace; solving the Palestinian question is an important way to achieve justice in the Middle East. Since the People's

Republic of China's foundation, it has firmly supported Palestinian rational demand and national sovereignty.⁴⁶

The centrality of the Israel-Palestine conflict cannot be ignored. The terrorist attacks on October 7 reinforced the importance of this issue. The key to American success in preserving its hegemonic role in the region goes through the resolution of the Palestinian issue. The United States must use the leverage it has over Israel for the benefit of Israel and Palestine. The Israel-Palestine question is central to the stability in the Middle East. Resolving the conflict between Israel and Palestine can win the US support and partnership with many of the Arab countries, and profoundly impact Iran's maneuvering. The issues of civil and human rights should not be dismissed or pushed aside. But it looks like running the campaigns for human and civil rights while working to permanently resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict and dismantling the Iranian-Israeli balance of power might be easier than focusing on one of the three without the others.



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