



Rethinking Security and Stability in the Middle East

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Questions and debates surrounding what constitutes genuine “security” and “stability” within the Middle East tend to overwhelmingly neglect the underlying sources of insecurity and instability in the region. Academics, policymakers, and commentators are repeatedly “surprised” when instances of such instability and insecurity erupt to the forefront of regional, and at times, global, politics. For example, the last major regional shock was the 2011 Arab uprisings, which left some academics, analysts, and policymakers wondering how they “missed” such a critical development.¹ Most recently, only a week after White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan touted the Biden administration’s accomplishments in the region while claiming “the Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades,” the eruption of war in Gaza has once again shattered such assumptions of stability and security in the region.² Now, with almost 20,000 already dead and an ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the war risks devolving into a prolonged disaster with the possibility of escalating into a region-wide conflict with catastrophic consequences.

What explains these repeated disconnects? The problem is, primarily, one of epistemology: security and stability within the Middle East are repeatedly framed through the lens of global U.S. primacy. Security and stability in the Middle East are equated as synonymous with physical control and continuity, namely the ability of the U.S. and its partners in the region to preserve the overall status quo. As Waleed Hazbun explains, “threats and insecurity are defined, implicitly or explicitly, in relationship to the U.S.-dominated structures and rules of political order that are understood to provide security.”³ This framing has been reproduced via a system of knowledge production – in both academic and policy circles – and lobbying by special interests designed to sustain the status quo.⁴

Such an approach neglects that the prevailing illiberal order within the Middle East – constructed around external dominance and a series of patron-client relationships – is the most profound cause of regional insecurity and instability. This essay discusses the emergence and maintenance of this illiberal and unstable order. It focuses on the ongoing accelerated effort to preserve this order in the face of the “Cold War 2.0” with the Middle East being framed as a theater for a new broader battle over global hegemony, and the

1 F. Gregory Gause, III. “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability.” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2011-07-01/why-middle-east-studies-missed-arab-spring>.

2 Gal Beckerman. “‘The Middle East is Quieter Today Than it Has Been in Two Decades.’” *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/israel-war-middle-east-jake-sullivan/675580/>.

3 Waleed Hazbun. “Insecurity, Order, and Pluralism in the Middle East: An Agenda for a Critical Approach to Security Studies,” in *The Middle East: Thinking About and Beyond Security and Stability*, ed. by Lorenzo Kamel. Peter Lang, 2019, 65-90.

4 Osamah Khalil. *America’s Dream Palace: Middle East Expertise and the Rise of the National Security State*. Harvard University Press, 2016.



centrality that the Abraham Accords have assumed in such efforts. It is argued herein that true security and stability do not come from the top-down, but rather the bottom-up. Moving forward, despite being an up-hill challenge, a new emphasis must be placed on the importance of human security – namely the preservation of political, economic, and social rights – while challenging the dominant heuristic of American-led “stability” and “security” in the Middle East.

Flawed Frameworks and Shaky Foundations

Insecurity and instability in the Middle East are the inevitable result of the existing regional political, economic, and security order. This is because the order is artificial, constructed primarily around external dominance and the cultivation of regional clients to uphold such control.

This order has its roots in European dominance in the Middle East. European imperialism and colonialism served to fragment the region and keep it dependent upon external support, legacies which continue to this day.⁵ Relying on different mechanism of cooptation, divide-and-rule-politics, and repression, these colonial powers “buttressed or even created authoritarian ruling regimes and established core state institutions that persisted in the post-dependence period and were used to maintain control over populations, such as the military and bureaucracy.”⁶ After the end of the second World War, European control gave way to elites from a rising America who “saw themselves as successors to the Pax Britannica” and began “rearranging the remnants of the old European empires into an American-styled world order.”⁷

The contours of this order were heavily influenced by America’s Cold War with the Soviet Union. Occurring alongside the period of decolonialization, the Cold War resulted in over four decades of the two global superpowers vying for political, economic, and military dominance in the Middle East. As the United States and the Soviet Union battled for influence, they not only exacerbated state-society struggles and geopolitical conflicts in the region, but further undermined attempts at fostering democracy while these countries were attempting to transition away from external dominance.⁸

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington embarked on a grand strategy rooted in primacy, and the Middle East became ground zero for the broader liberal hegemonic project.⁹ Through two wars in Iraq (1991 and 2003) and the “global war on terror” following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the United States achieved unparalleled military dominance in the region, showering its partners – such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and many others – with advanced weaponry, intelligence support, and diplomatic cover. When the Arab uprisings erupted in 2011 and threatened to upend this order, the United States and its partners in the region moved quickly to preserve the status

5 D. K. Fieldhouse. *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

6 Melani Cammett et. al. *A Political Economy of the Middle East*. Westview Press, 2015.

7 Lloyd Gardner, *Three Kings: The Rise of an American Empire in the Middle East after World War II*. The New Press, 2009.

8 Rashid Khalidi. *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*. Beacon Press, 2010.

9 Raymond Hinnebusch, “The Middle East in World Hierarchy: Imperialism and Resistance,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14:2 (2011): 213-46.



quo, using both direct and indirect means of counterrevolution.¹⁰ In the period since the uprisings, the Middle East has witnessed an authoritarian resurgence, aided in large part by the efforts of the United States to preserve its dominance in the region. Now, regional “security” and “stability” are being portrayed by the United States as under threat from alternative great powers, specifically Russia and China.

U.S. primacy in the Middle East has historically been rooted in two foundational pillars: the “myth of authoritarian stability” and unwavering support for the state of Israel.¹¹

The “myth of authoritarian stability” refers to the flawed belief held in Washington that illiberal actors in the Middle East are the best guarantors of U.S. strategic interests in the region.¹² For decades, policymakers have put faith in the belief that select authoritarian governments are the only viable upholders of stability and order in the Middle East. Crediting the “myth of authoritarian stability” has led the United States to shower select autocratic actors in the region with tremendous amounts of military aid, advanced weaponry, diplomatic cover, intelligence assistance, and more.

Unwavering support for Israel has remained a cornerstone of U.S. Middle East policy and should likewise be viewed as a mechanism through which the United States has sought to further advance its hegemonic interests in the broader region. The “special relationship” between Washington and Tel Aviv has evolved dramatically since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Israel has received unparalleled amounts of U.S. military aid – currently \$3.8 billion per year – which is often complemented with other arms deals and security benefits.¹³ Israel also remains intimately tapped into Washington, commanding attention on both sides of the political aisle.

Constructed around the preservation of American primacy, this order in the Middle East is artificial, upheld only via exclusion, intense repression, and security guarantees from the United States. It is an order that breeds inherent insecurity and instability. It is in the pursuit of continued U.S. regional primacy that “security” and “stability” become synonymous with the preservation of the status quo. The region’s political, economic, and social structures have been engineered to further the interests of a narrow elite, coupled with tactics designed to limit the freedom to express dissent, mobilize, and so on. By effectively subsidizing this order – and the regional actors that preside over it – the United States has directly implicated itself in the policies of our Middle East partners while disincentivizing them to change course.

As a result of this order, the Middle East is victim to what Samer Abboud refers to as an “insecurity conundrum” – whereby, under the notion of striving for security, the policies of the U.S. and its partners exacerbate the sources of insecurity that ultimately lead to instability.¹⁴ This conundrum is at the heart of the Middle East’s greatest divide: between

10 Gamal Selim. “The United States and the Arab Spring: The Dynamics of Political Engineering.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35:3 (2013): 255-72.

11 Jon Hoffman. “A Shaky Foundation: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability in the Middle East.” Policy Analysis no. 939, Cato Institute, Washington, DC, December 20, 2022, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/shaky-foundation>.

12 Ibid.

13 Jakob Knutson. “What to Know About U.S. Aid to Israel.” *Axios*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/11/04/us-israel-aid-military-funding-chart>.

14 Samer Abboud. “Topologies of Security Workshop Keynote Address.” *Security In Context*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.securityincontext.com/posts/topologies-of-security-workshop-keynote-address>.



regional governments and the people they rule over.¹⁵ As Shadi Hamid explains, this order, and those who preside over it, has “contributed to the spread of terrorism, long-running insurgencies, the outbreak of civil war, and ill-considered military interventions that prolong those civil wars.”¹⁶ The fragility of this regional order is often not evident to external observers – specifically those who uncritically accept U.S. framing of regional security – until it erupts to the forefront, which then results in a vicious cycle of reactive measures to preserve the status quo which in turn entrench and compound the divisions and grievances that often erupt from below and/or are manipulated from above for political gain.

Cold War 2.0 and The New “Axis of Abraham”

The United States has grown to view Russian and Chinese encroachment in the Middle East as a serious threat to American primacy as part of a broader “Cold War 2.0” framing that is growing to dominate U.S. foreign policy in general. This has resulted in a new “race to the bottom” by Washington to reassert its dominance in the Middle East and reassure its regional partners that the United States remains committed to maintaining its expansive military presence and remaining as the effective subsidizer of their security. This has been coupled with a more general framing of preserving regional stability and security around the notion of countering Moscow and Beijing.

However, regional actors do not view the return of global multipolarity through a zero-sum lens as does the United States. They are keenly aware of the limitations facing China in the region, and the lack of interest (and ability) of Beijing to assume a dominant hegemonic position in the region akin to what the United States has sought to maintain over the past almost three decades.¹⁷ Russia and China are opportunists in the Middle East, and neither of them is able or willing to build a new political and security order in the region.

Viewing great power politics in the Middle East through the lens of U.S. primacy neglects how external engagement is being shaped by regional actors, namely their efforts to advance their own strategic imperatives at home and abroad.¹⁸

States in the Middle East are pursuing a two-tiered strategy to best advance their own short-and-long-term interests. In the short term, they hope to manipulate the return of great power politics by cultivating fear in Washington about losing its position relative to Russia or China and are pressing for major policy concessions, resulting in a type of “reverse leverage.”¹⁹ In the long-term, states across the Middle East recognize that the rise of non-Western powers and the return of global multipolarity is a reality and are therefore positioning themselves accordingly.

15 Nader Hashemi. “The Arab Spring, U.S. Foreign Policy, and the Question of Democracy in the Middle East.” *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 41:1 (2012): 31-46.

16 Shadi Hamid. *The Problem of Democracy: America, the Middle East, and the Rise and Fall of an Idea*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

17 Jon Hoffman. “Neither Russia Nor China Could Fill a U.S. Void in the Middle East.” *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/15/neither-russia-nor-china-could-fill-a-u-s-void-in-the-middle-east/>.

18 Jon Hoffman. “The Return of Great Power Competition to the Middle East: A Two-Level Game.” *Middle East Policy* 28:1 (2021): 87-104.

19 *Ibid.*



It is within this new effort to maintain American primacy in the region that the so-called “Abraham Accords” have emerged as the new lodestar of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Since the introduction of the Accords in 2020 by President Donald Trump – which witnessed Israel formally normalize relations with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), later expanded to also include Sudan and Morocco – the initiative has been hailed as a “dawn of a new Middle East,” one that is more stable, secure, and prosperous.²⁰ The Accords represent a more formal merging of the two guiding pillars of U.S. Middle East policy – the “myth of authoritarian stability” and unwavering support for the state of Israel – an objective that has historically been unachievable due to various obstacles, particularly the lack of a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. However, the convergence of strategic interests between Israel and a number of Arab states has led to political elites on both sides viewing the matter of Palestine as little more than an impediment to their shared objectives.

The Abraham Accords – and the various political, economic, and security initiatives that have sprung out of these normalization deals – have emerged as the chief framework through which Washington believes it will be able to maintain its regional dominance.²¹ Through this more formal coalition, Washington believes it can maintain its hegemonic status amidst the return of great power politics to the Middle East by “offshoring” its duties to regional partners while also allocating more attention to other global theaters such as Eastern Europe and the Pacific.

However, this is not how regional actors interpret the Accords. As mentioned above, these actors do not view the return of global multipolarity through a zero-sum lens as does the United States. Instead, regional actors view the Accords as a mechanism to keep the United States deeply engaged in the region as the continued guarantor of regime security. For Arab autocrats, entrance into the Accords has been a lucrative mechanism to curry favor in Washington by cozying up to Israel while simultaneously continuing—and in many cases, deepening—their repressive policies at home and being granted considerable policy concessions from the United States in the process. For Israel, the Accords are viewed as a way to align the region’s states against Iran, remain at the forefront of U.S. Middle East policy, and sidestep the Palestinian question altogether.

In many ways, the Abraham Accords represent the pinnacle of the “reverse leverage” strategy being adopted by regional actors as both Russia and China expand their respective footprints in the Middle East. This is precisely how Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has approached Riyadh’s possible entry into the Accords: as a way to pressure the United States into granting the Kingdom sweeping concessions and guaranteeing Washington remains its ultimate protector over the long term.²² In the hopes of pressuring Washington under the aegis of great power politics and using Saudi Arabia’s

20 Quint Forgey. “The Dawn of a New Middle East’: Trump Celebrates Abraham Accords with White House Signing Ceremony.” Politico, September 15, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/15/trump-abraham-accords-palestinians-peace-deal-415083>.

21 For an overview of the various initiatives that have sprung out of the Accords, see: Jon Hoffman. “The United States Doesn’t Need to Recommit to the Middle East.” Foreign Policy, July 11, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/11/us-uae-defense-agreement-saudi-biden-israel-security/>; Jonathan Lord. “America is Pushing its Security Ideas on a Lukewarm Middle East.” Foreign Policy, July 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/11/middle-east-security-military-defense-us-congress-israel-saudi-arabia-uae-gcc-iran-biden-salman-zayed/>.

22 Jon Hoffman. “Biden’s Middle East Deal is a Disaster.” Responsible Statecraft, September 27, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/biden-deal-saudi-arabia-israel/>.



possible entry into the Abraham Accords as a tool to do so, MBS has made his demands clear: in return for normalizing relations with Israel, the United States must provide the Kingdom with a formal security guarantee and assist in the facilitation of Riyadh's civilian nuclear program.²³ Saudi officials have themselves acknowledged this "reverse leverage" strategy: according to the Wall Street Journal, "in private, Saudi officials said, the crown prince has said he expects that by playing major powers against each other, Saudi Arabia can eventually pressure Washington to concede to its demands for better access to U.S. weapons and nuclear technology."²⁴

Even in the wake of the ongoing war in Gaza, the Biden administration appears wedded to its plan to center U.S. regional policy on security guarantees and nuclear cooperation with the dictatorship in Saudi Arabia in exchange for normalizing relations with Israel, despite the immense costs.²⁵ A litany of commentary has emerged post-October 7th arguing that this path remains the best path forward for countering Chinese ambitions in the region, with others citing the war as an example of what a "post-American Middle East" would look like – despite the fact that this conflict erupted under a policy of deep U.S. engagement in the Middle East.²⁶ Such an approach constitutes little more than a repackaging of the status quo and an extension of the prevailing artificial order while exacerbating the underlying sources of regional instability and insecurity.

The Abraham Accords are a political mechanism through which Washington and its regional partners seek to preserve the prevailing status quo in the Middle East. They are rooted in an ethos of continuity, not change. The Accords have not stemmed the vicious cycle of instability and insecurity that continues to plague the region. In fact, they have exacerbated them.²⁷

The Accords represent the formalization of a coercive political, economic, and security order designed to maintain the status quo in the region.²⁸ The presentation of the Accords as a mechanism to advance peace is designed to distract from the central role of these actors in the region's destabilization. In fact, the Accords have emboldened these actors, allowing them to continue with their personal agendas while being cheered on by Washington for ascribing to a nonexistent peace. Far from a panacea for the various problems facing the Middle East, the Abraham Accords represent an extension of the

23 Dion Nissenbaum, Dov Lieber, and Stephen Kalin. "Saudi Arabia Seeks U.S. Security Pledges, Nuclear Help for Peace with Israel." The Wall Street Journal, March 9, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-seeks-u-s-security-pledges-nuclear-help-for-peace-with-israel-cd47baaf>.

24 Stephen Kalin and Summer Said. "Saudi Crown Prince Test Drives Nonaligned Foreign Policy." The Wall Street Journal, March 14, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-crown-prince-test-drives-nonaligned-foreign-policy-450ddefb>.

25 Jon Hoffman and Justin Logan. "Time to Change Course in the Middle East." The National Interest, October 21, 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/time-change-course-middle-east-207004>.

26 See, for example: Hussein Ibish. "Israel is Walking Into a Trap." The Atlantic, October 13, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/israel-hamas-war-iran-trap/675628/>; Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr. "The War that Remade the Middle East." Foreign Affairs, November 20, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/war-remade-middle-east-fantappie-nasr>.

27 Jon Hoffman. "The Abraham Accords and the Imposed Middle East Order." The National Interest, October 3, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/abraham-accords-and-imposed-middle-east-order-205136>.

28 Ibid.



prevailing artificial order while exacerbating the underlying sources of regional instability and insecurity.

Toward Continuity or Change?

There is a desperate need for a fundamental overhaul to how we conceptualize security and stability within the Middle East, namely one that challenges the dominant heuristic of an American-led regional order. Security and stability come from the bottom-up, not the top-down.

A recent essay by Alaa Tartir and Ahmed Morsy stresses the need for human security in the Middle East, highlighting how the persistent focus on physical and military security – which is a byproduct of viewing regional security through the lens of forcibly preserving the status quo – has resulted in “crises of legitimacy, inclusivity and representation, absence of accountability, and normalcy of marginalization and alienation.”²⁹ They succinctly explain that the increasing list of problems facing the region such as “extreme poverty, persisting hunger, natural disasters, political and criminal violence, the consequences of armed conflict, climate change, and other environmental changes cannot be addressed by military means.”³⁰ This is precisely the type of holistic, people-centric framework that is needed to break free from the cycle of scholarship and policies that reproduce an unstable and insecure status quo in the Middle East. A renewed emphasis on human, political, economic, and social rights as the only true guarantor of stability and security in the region is imperative moving forward.

Of course, such a fundamental reorientation will be difficult and is bound to encounter multiple challenges. Entrenched systems of knowledge production and lobbying designed to preserve the status quo in the Middle East represent the most direct hurdle. Additionally, the Middle East is likely to face more challenges from below in the coming future, for the original catalysts that led to the 2011 Arab uprisings have only intensified in the past decade as illiberal actors across the region have sought to deepen their grasp on power by doubling down on repressive and exclusionary tactics while fueling the grievances that led to the eruption of mass mobilization.³¹ This could easily result in renewed intense state-society and geopolitical competitions that occurred in the post-2011 period. Such occurrences will inevitably result in renewed pleas and efforts to maintain “security” and “stability” by forcibly upholding the status quo. Still, if the region is to break free of this cycle of instability and insecurity, it will require new and innovative pathways to achieve a more peaceful and equitable Middle East.

29 Alaa Tartir and Ahmed Morsy. “The Securitization of Everyday Life: Where are the People?” Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive Security in the Middle East (PRISME), <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/securitization-of-everyday-life-alaa-tartir-ahmed-morsy/>.

30 Ibid.

31 Mahya Yahya. “The Middle East is on the Brink Again.” Foreign Affairs, March 22, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2022-03-22/middle-east-brink-again>.



PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East



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PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East

PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade’s advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.