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Ending the New Wars of Attrition: Opportunities for Collective Regional Security in the Middle East

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Introduction

The 2023–2025 war in Gaza and Lebanon has not only shattered any remaining hopes for regional peace but also exposed the impotence of the international community, the United Nations (UN), and the great powers to decisively intervene and halt the devastation. The conventional narratives of entrenched conflict, stolen aspirations, and elusive stability have been revisited countless times, yet the Middle East remains ensnared in chaos.

Analytical frameworks of political science have failed to live up to the task. Instead, the profound metaphors, incisive ideas, and visionary interpretations of the Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz can open new avenues of thought. A chronicler of Egypt's and the Middle East's transformative history in the twentieth century, Mahfouz often emphasized the singular path to salvation amid conflict: a just and comprehensive peace.

In his work *Dreams of Departure* (2007), Mahfouz illustrates this principle with vivid allegories. In dream number 386, he narrates a wartime scenario where an enemy soldier, ironically a former teacher of English literature, is captured. The soldier reflects on the futility of war, underscoring how it deepens divisions instead of resolving them, and concludes with a poignant assertion: “Justice is the only solution.”¹

It is justice, then, that the enemy in Mahfouz's dream prescribes as the only solution to all conflicts and crises: justice, or rather its absence, is the recurring thread that links the Middle East's enduring struggles. Since 1948, systemic injustice has been the principal driver of wars, displacement, and chronic instability across the Middle East. Today, the region remains the global epicenter of violent conflicts, mass displacement, and humanitarian crises.² The Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, and the ensuing Israeli response have exacerbated

these challenges, plunging Gaza, Lebanon, and other affected areas into unprecedented levels of suffering and transformed the Middle East into a theater where mass crimes are committed, the world's only apartheid system is upheld—targeting Palestinian populations in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem— and civilians are constantly facing mass displacement.

What, then, caused the Middle East to be deprived of justice? What brought us to where we are today, despite our region's human and natural wealth, its civilizational depth, and its cultural diversity? How did the chances for regional peace collapse? Why was the international community paralyzed in the face of a war that ravaged Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond for fifteen months? How can the UN, the chosen representative of our collective human conscience, watch as the Palestinian people are starved to death, denied humanitarian and medical aid, and subjected to diseases and afflictions that humanity has long conquered, all because the Israeli government obstructs relief efforts?

Why did the international community condone Israeli practices of indiscriminate violence against civilians, not only in Gaza but also in Lebanon, while the UN Security Council—entrusted with maintaining international peace and security—remained inert, issuing no binding resolutions to halt the war? Why did the United States and numerous Western governments continue to supply weapons, ammunition, and financial support to Israel, despite the deaths of nearly 50,000 Palestinians and thousands of Lebanese?³

Finally, how did this ongoing conflict erode the Middle East's security at an alarming pace, creating yet another regional war of attrition, and why did the global community remain complicit in this descent into chaos?

These questions form the heart of this essay. They are not merely rhetorical but essential to understanding the devastating cycle of injustice and its implications for the Middle East and the world at large. And while they can be addressed by examining the economic, social, and developmental policies of Middle Eastern nations; the nature of their governments; and their intricate alliances with great powers like the United States, China, Europe, and Russia, a deeper look reveals a troubling reality.⁴ These great powers often prioritize strategic interests over humanitarian and developmental considerations, perpetuating and exacerbating the region's instability.

As such, the Middle East's salvation depends on collaborative regional efforts rather than turning to external powers like the United States, whose interventions have been failing for decades. The region's only viable path toward stability and security lies in fostering dialogue, coordinated initiatives, and joint diplomacy among its influential states.

A regional framework for security in the Middle East must be rooted in the principles of peace, respect for sovereignty, noninterference, the containment of armed militias and violent nonstate actors, and in pushing back against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Such principles could constitute the basis for a Middle Eastern Organization for

Security and Cooperation—following the European precedent from 1975—and could promote peace between Palestinians and Israelis, and foster nonviolent coexistence in war-torn nations like Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan.⁵ They also could initiate a new regional drive toward normalizing economic, trade, cultural, and diplomatic relations between the Middle East’s most adversative countries.

This is not an argument for detaching the Middle East from the great powers or a dismissal of the strategic significance of their policies and alliances. Rather, it is a call for the region’s populations, governments, and civil society organizations to assume collective accountability in addressing their multifaceted crises. It is an argument for regionalizing security, stability, and peace in the Middle East.

It urges key stakeholders—from Israelis and Palestinians to Iran and the Gulf countries—to commit unequivocally to the cessation of conflicts, the de-escalation of arms races, the advancement of peace and justice over aggression, and paying the tributes that power has to pay to reason—to paraphrase the opening statement of Justice Robert H. Jackson, chief U.S. prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials at the conclusion of World War II.⁶

The Primacy of Regional Actors

It is well established that some Middle Eastern countries today, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Türkiye, Israel, and Iran, wield significant influence beyond their borders. Their comprehensive power—spanning political, military, economic, and diplomatic domains—positions them uniquely to extinguish the region’s fires. However, their current policies often entangle them in direct or proxy conflicts, as seen in Israel’s tensions with Iran, Türkiye’s intervention in Syria—and to a lesser extent in Iraq—and the UAE’s and Saudi Arabia’s military involvement in Yemen.⁷ Even Egypt’s policies in Libya, Sudan and the Horn of Africa, although clearly restrained and cautious, reflect the broader regional pattern of competing interests fueling instability.⁸

Iran and Israel, in particular, have played central roles in perpetuating violence across Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.⁹ Their antagonistic policies alienate them from other influential states and restrict their interactions to pragmatic agreements, such as Iran’s accord with Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic ties and de-escalate the Yemen conflict, and Israel’s collaboration with Egypt to manage border tensions and address Gaza-related crises.¹⁰

In contrast, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt increasingly are embracing strategies that prioritize diplomacy and nonviolent foreign policies over military involvement in protracted conflicts. This strategic pivot focuses on the national security concerns of the respective regional player. Examples of such strategies include Saudi and Emirati initiatives to address the Yemen crisis; Saudi involvement in post-Assad Syria; and Egypt’s deliberate efforts to

stabilize Libya, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa in order to proactively counter Addis Ababa's expanding influence in Somaliland.¹¹ Collectively, these policies underscore a growing consensus that enduring stability is best achieved through regional-led mediation, negotiation, and cooperation rather than military actions.

Extinguishing the raging fires in the Middle East requires a collective willingness to build a robust framework for regional security and cooperation. Such a framework must be grounded in fair and enforceable principles and include all countries, from Iran in the east to Morocco in the west. It should foster trade, promote good neighborhood practices, and leverage regional resources to enhance security and prosperity. The inability—or unwillingness—of the great powers, particularly the United States, to lead such an initiative underscores the urgency for regional players to assume this responsibility.

However, the feasibility of a collective endeavor led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Türkiye, Israel, and Iran is contingent on overcoming significant obstacles that include mutual distrust, conflicting strategic goals, and their governments' divergent policies. These challenges may render full cooperation improbable, but they also highlight opportunities for limited partnerships among subsets of these states based on ad hoc alliances. An objective analysis of the region's dynamics might reveal pathways to partial collaboration, offering a pragmatic starting point for a broader and more enduring framework.

New Wars of Attrition

Before the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, the Middle East, with its long history of volatile and disruptive conflicts, was already struggling to endure a cycle of wars and armed conflicts that had defied both military and political resolutions for decades. The region remained ensnared in a web of violence that threatened its survival, its future, and the aspirations of its people.

Israel, in particular, was engaged in an aggressive *fait accompli* strategy aimed at extinguishing the Palestinian cause. By escalating settlement activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, imposing a blockade on Gaza, and systematically eroding the governance capacity of the Palestinian National Authority, Israel worked to undermine the two-state solution and the principle of land for peace.¹² Successive far-right Israeli governments entrenched an apartheid-like regime, subjecting Palestinians to structural violence, dispossession, and dehumanization.¹³ Meanwhile, Israeli citizens faced growing insecurity and violence, fostering widespread rejection of the two-state solution and deepening societal divisions.¹⁴

On the other side, Palestinians were forced to endure the gradual erosion of their national aspirations, as the collapse of the 1993/1995 Oslo Accords and the waning international and regional focus on their right to self-determination left them increasingly vulnerable to

occupation, settlement expansion, and blockade.¹⁵ Although many embraced nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience, armed factions such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad resorted to violence, further complicating the path to peace.¹⁶

Historically, outbreaks of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prompted swift intervention by regional and international powers. Such efforts often resulted in ceasefire agreements, temporary truces, or humanitarian assistance that at minimum staved off complete societal collapse. However, by the time the Gaza war erupted in October 2023, most global attention had shifted to other regional concerns. Except for consistent Egyptian and Jordanian initiatives emphasizing the importance of the Palestinian cause, the need to revive peace negotiations, and the principle of land for peace, international focus largely had turned to the normalization of the “Abraham Accords,” involving Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco.¹⁷ On the whole, the Palestinian cause was reduced to symbolic condemnations, perfunctory calls for peace, and limited humanitarian aid administered by UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

Beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, numerous other crises plagued the Middle East. Syria’s civil war, which had begun in 2011, continued unabated.¹⁸ Lebanon, paralyzed by political disintegration and Hezbollah’s dominance, became a pawn in Iran’s regional ambitions.¹⁹ Iraq grappled with tensions between Iranian-backed militias and the legitimate government, while Yemen’s civil war persisted despite partial de-escalation efforts mediated by China.²⁰ Sudan descended into chaos as rival factions vied for power, and Libya remained mired in conflict, unable to recover from years of instability.²¹ Natural disasters, such as the catastrophic Derna floods in 2023, only compounded the suffering.²²

Amidst this turbulence, the burden on regional and international powers to address these crises became overwhelming. Capitals like Cairo, Riyadh, and Tehran faced immense pressure to manage their foreign policy resources; major global powers, including Washington and Beijing, appeared resigned to the inevitability of prolonged instability. It was against this backdrop that the Gaza war erupted, quickly escalating into a regional war with far-reaching implications.

This war was distinct in its protracted nature and the apparent international inability to end it. Diplomatic tools—mediation, negotiation, and UN resolutions—proved ineffectual for more than a year. Calls for a ceasefire, disengagement proposals, and peace treaties yielded little progress, marking a departure from previous conflicts. To truly grasp the unprecedented gravity and complexity of this crisis, one must delve into a comparative analysis of earlier Middle Eastern wars that began in the mid-twentieth century. Such an examination is essential to understanding the profound distinctions between those conflicts and the one unfolding today.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the longest of all regional wars prior to October 7, 2023, began on May 15, 1948, and ended on March 10, 1949.²³ This war displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, marking the start of the enduring refugee crisis. Less than a decade

later, Israel, Britain, and France launched the Tripartite Aggression of October 1956 in response to Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal following its agreement to purchase Soviet-made arms by way of Czechoslovakia.²⁴ UN Resolution 1001, adopted on November 6, 1956, mandated an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of all military troops.²⁵ Military operations ceased the next day, and Britain, France, and Israel withdrew their troops shortly thereafter.

The June 1967 war, commonly known as the Six-Day War, lasted from June 5 to 10 and saw the Arab armies of Jordan, Egypt, and Syria decisively defeated by Israel.²⁶ Following the war, the three Arab countries respectively agreed to UN Security Council Resolutions 234, 235, and 236, which established a ceasefire but did not require Israel to withdraw its forces from the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Sinai, or the Golan Heights.²⁷ In November 1967, after extensive deliberations and consensus between the United States and the Soviet Union, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242.²⁸ In its Arabic-approved version, the resolution demanded that Israel withdraw from “the occupied Arab territories”; the English version, by contrast, called for Israel's withdrawal from “occupied Arab territories.” This linguistic ambiguity allowed Israel, with American backing, to circumvent efforts for a full withdrawal.

The War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel (1969–1970) ended with a U.S. initiative establishing a mutual ceasefire that facilitated the resumption of international mediation.²⁹ However, the initiative exempted Washington from applying real pressure on Israel to implement Resolution 242, leaving key issues unresolved. These tensions culminated in the October 1973 War, launched by Egypt and Syria to liberate occupied territories.³⁰ Military operations lasted 19 days, during which the UN Security Council adopted Resolutions 338, 339, and 340, calling for a ceasefire.³¹ U.S. diplomatic efforts culminated in the second disengagement agreement between Egypt and Israel in September 1975, paving the way for subsequent negotiations and peace treaties.³² These efforts eventually restored Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty, honoring the sacrifices of the Egyptian forces during the October War.³³

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Second Lebanon War in 2006 also drew significant international intervention.³⁴ The 1982 invasion, which began on June 6, resulted in the occupation of Beirut.³⁵ Despite American and European diplomatic efforts, including those of a Soviet envoy, the peace treaty signed on May 17, 1983, between Lebanon and Israel collapsed shortly thereafter.³⁶ Continued resistance by Lebanese militants ultimately expelled Israeli forces by 2000. The Second Lebanon War in 2006, fought between Israel and Hezbollah, lasted just over 30 days, beginning on July 12 and concluding on August 14. UN Security Council Resolution 1701 established international peacekeeping forces in Lebanon, but many of its key provisions—including those requiring compliance from Israel and Hezbollah—remained unfulfilled.³⁷

However, the Gaza war of 2023 tells a fundamentally different story. This conflict stands apart in its endurance and in the international community's inability to effect meaningful change. Western bias, particularly U.S. support for Israel, consistently has shielded Israeli actions from significant consequences. American support in the form of military, economic, and diplomatic backing has emboldened Israel to perpetuate its occupation and systematically dismantle Palestinian aspirations. At the same time, other global powers, such as China and Russia, have remained either unwilling or unable to exert meaningful influence in resolving the conflict.

The Middle East's current predicament is further exacerbated by the region's status as a battleground for direct and proxy conflicts. Israel's rivalry with Iran, coupled with the broader arms race in the region, continues to fuel instability.³⁸ The absence of a balanced power structure and effective international leadership has left the Middle East trapped in a cycle of violence, with devastating consequences for its people and far-reaching implications for global security.

The Policies of Influential Regional Powers Between 2011 and 2023

Just as the Arab-Israeli wars and other significant regional conflicts—such as the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990), the subsequent liberation of Kuwait (1991), and the American invasion of Iraq (2003)—reshaped the Middle East, the Arab Spring uprisings brought radical changes to the foreign policies of the six influential regional powers: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Türkiye, Israel, and Iran.

Before the 2011 uprisings, the Middle East was grappling with the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the protracted regional war on terror, and stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The region faced compounded instability from the Gaza blockade, intensified settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and repeated escalations between Israel and Palestinian factions in Gaza. Simultaneously, tensions between Iran and its Gulf neighbors, the United States, and Israel were mounting over Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional policies.³⁹

The Arab Spring unleashed a wave of unprecedented upheaval. Long-entrenched rulers in Tunisia and Egypt were ousted, while Libya, Syria, and Yemen descended into civil war. In response to these evolving dynamics and heightened instability, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Türkiye, Israel, and Iran all began recalibrating their foreign policies to address the shifting landscape and emerging challenges.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE: Confronting Regional Instability

In 2011, Saudi Arabia and the UAE viewed the Arab Spring uprisings as a destabilizing force, fearing the chaos could empower political Islam movements and increase Iranian influence, particularly in Bahrain and Yemen. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi took decisive steps to counter the rise of Islamist groups by aligning with military and secular elites who opposed the Islamists in countries throughout the region. Simultaneously, they sought to contain Iran's regional expansion in Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Leveraging increased oil revenues generated during the upheaval, Saudi Arabia and the UAE enhanced their military capabilities, sought protection guarantees from the United States, and diversified their alliances. Such measures included acquiring advanced technological systems from China and modern weapons from Russia to reduce reliance on Western powers and expand their international partnerships.⁴⁰

Despite their efforts, Saudi Arabia and the UAE could not prevent the escalating crisis in Yemen. Yemen's hopes for a democratic transition after the 2011 uprising were derailed as the country plunged into civil war, involving the Iranian-backed Houthi movement, the internationally recognized government, and Saudi-Emirati-supported forces.⁴¹ In 2015, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain launched a military intervention as part of the "Arab Coalition" to counter the Houthis, escalating the conflict and leading to repeated Houthi attacks on Saudi and Emirati territories until 2023.⁴²

By the spring of 2023, after years of mediation attempts led by Oman and Iraq, China brokered a diplomatic breakthrough: It facilitated the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which had been severed in 2016 when hostilities between clients of the two countries broke out in Yemen.⁴³ Riyadh and Tehran committed to respecting each other's sovereignty and refraining from interfering in internal affairs. This diplomatic success brought a significant shift in Yemen, as military confrontations became less frequent, Saudi and Emirati forces partially withdrew, and the Iran-backed Houthis noticeably decreased their aggression against Saudi and Emirati territories.⁴⁴

Prior to October 7, 2023, Saudi Arabia capitalized on the relative calm in Yemen and its improved relations with Iran to focus on internal reforms under its Vision 2030 framework.⁴⁵ These reforms aimed to transform the kingdom's economy and society. Concurrently, Saudi Arabia pursued new security agreements with the United States and explored the possibility of normalizing relations with Israel to strengthen its international alliances.⁴⁶

The UAE, meanwhile, shifted its foreign policy priorities following its withdrawal from Yemen. It focused on areas such as Sudan, particularly after the outbreak of its civil war in 2023.⁴⁷ The UAE also spearheaded the 2020 Abraham Accords, leading Bahrain, Morocco, and later Sudan in normalizing their relations with Israel. This milestone paved the way for

increased trade, diplomatic, political, and security cooperation with Israel.⁴⁸ At the same time, the UAE bolstered its regional alliances, including with Egypt and Syria, pursuing a gradual normalization process with Damascus—which concluded in December 2024 with the fall of the Assad regime.⁴⁹ It also advanced its global partnerships, cultivating strong ties with China and Russia to reinforce its international influence.

Egypt: Navigating Regional Turmoil

Between 2011 and 2013, Egypt’s foreign policy experienced instability.⁵⁰ During this time, Egypt distanced itself from active engagement in most regional issues, focusing primarily on the Palestinian conflict and its implications for national security, particularly in Sinai and beyond. However, by the beginning of 2014, Egypt’s foreign policy had regained momentum, only to encounter a radically transformed Middle East fraught with unprecedented threats and dangers.

To the west of Egyptian territory, the outbreak of civil war in Libya led to the collapse of the political process aimed at rebuilding the state and its institutions, as well as forging a new social contract between the government and its citizens following the fall of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in October 2011.⁵¹ The conflict, marked by a military struggle between rival forces and militias, quickly escalated into a situation that drew in multiple regional and international actors.⁵² Amidst the chaos, terrorist groups freely roamed the country, spreading violence beyond Libyan borders and posing a direct threat to Egypt’s security, as well as to the safety of Egyptian nationals working in Libya.⁵³ In response, Cairo was compelled to seek alliances with various factions involved in the conflict, coordinating efforts with friendly regional (UAE) and international (France) powers to curb the civil war and foster national consensus.⁵⁴ The Egyptian government also decided to take military action against terrorist groups based in eastern Libya, which had not only destabilized the border region but also perpetrated a war crime by killing twenty-one Egyptian Copts in 2015.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Egypt sought to prevent Turkish incursions into western Libya, employing a combination of military and diplomatic strategies, and collaborating with the UN to craft a roadmap for the political process and to build unified legislative, executive, and judicial institutions in Libya.⁵⁶

To the south, Sudan’s political and societal stability was rapidly deteriorating, and in 2023, the country plunged into a violent conflict between the army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), following the failed attempts to establish legitimate governance after Omar al-Bashir’s fall in 2019.⁵⁷ The civil war is causing immense humanitarian suffering, displacing nearly a third of Sudan’s population and accounting for the world’s largest hunger crisis.⁵⁸ Egypt adopted a neutral “dialogue with all parties” approach, safeguarding its national security while strengthening relations with South Sudan and key Nile Basin countries to protect its water rights.⁵⁹ However, the influx of refugees and the broader humanitarian catastrophe

prompted Cairo to actively support the Sudanese army against the RSF and extend aid to official Sudanese institutions.⁶⁰ Egypt also sought to mobilize regional and international efforts to preserve Sudan's territorial integrity, uphold the legitimacy of the national state, and end the duality of the army and militias. Thus, Egyptian diplomacy advocated for the integration or dissolution of militias, disarmament, compensation for their members, and the restoration of stability across Sudan.

To the south also, tensions between Cairo and Addis Ababa remain acute.⁶¹ As the upstream nation with the greatest influence over the distribution of the Nile's waters among its basin countries—Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan, and Egypt—Ethiopia's policies are of critical concern to Egypt. In 2015, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan signed the “Renaissance Dam Document,” a declaration of principles aimed at ensuring the equitable sharing of the Nile waters.⁶² However, the Ethiopian government pursued a unilateral approach to the construction, operation, and filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.⁶³ This disregard for the concerns and rights of downstream nations, particularly Egypt and Sudan, undermined the agreement's intended spirit of cooperation.

Despite these broader regional concerns, Egypt's primary focus remained on its eastern border with the Gaza Strip—a vital corridor exploited for smuggling weapons and ammunition to terrorist groups operating in Sinai. Between 2014 and 2021, these groups inflicted heavy losses, claiming the lives of hundreds of soldiers, police officers, and civilians before Egypt successfully subdued them.⁶⁴ At the same time, the Gaza Strip remained a persistent flashpoint, with recurring armed confrontations between Hamas and Israel that Egypt worked to de-escalate.⁶⁵ These efforts aimed to reduce violence and maintain regional stability, as well as refocus regional and international attention on the Palestinian cause—an issue increasingly overshadowed by the broader turmoil in the Middle East and the shifting dynamics introduced by the Abraham Accords.⁶⁶

Türkiye: From Expansionism to Retrenchment

Before 2011, Türkiye, led by then prime minister Erdoğan and his Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), maintained strong relations with its regional neighbors. It enjoyed a cooperative partnership with Syria, including President Bashar al-Assad, centered around a shared stance of “resistance” to Israel.⁶⁷ Türkiye also maintained relatively positive, albeit less intensive, relations with Iraq and Iran, while actively fostering trade, economic, and political collaborations with Gulf states, Egypt, and Arab countries in North Africa.⁶⁸

Yet the Erdoğan government and the AKP Islamists, after years of close relations with Arab governments, found in the 2011 uprisings and the subsequent success of political Islam movements a major strategic opportunity for Türkiye to become a regional leader of Islamist movements. Further, Türkiye saw the chance to become the main mediator between Islamists and the American and European West, who were apprehensive of the Islamists' intentions. Even though significant factions of Egyptian and Tunisian society were apprehensive about the successful elections of Muslim Brotherhood leaders, Ankara backed the new governments unilaterally. The AKP-led Ankara also supported the Islamists in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, even as the popular uprisings in these countries turned into civil wars.⁶⁹ As a result, the good diplomatic and political relations and trade and investment ties that Türkiye had with most of the Gulf countries and with Iraq and Iran changed into tensions, confrontations, and conflict. In the eyes of its former advocates, Ankara's choice to support regionally unpopular Islamists dissipated Türkiye's image as a progressive, secular, civil state—shattering a projection that it had built up over much of the 20th century.

Between 2011 and 2020, Türkiye armed Islamist opposition groups in Syria and Libya and intervened militarily in both countries in various ways.⁷⁰ It also aligned itself with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and reacted strongly to their overthrow in 2013, providing refuge to members of the group fleeing Egypt.⁷¹

This support for Islamist movements across the Middle East and North Africa alienated numerous regional and international actors. Egypt emerged as a particularly vocal critic of Türkiye's actions, perceiving this pivot as a direct threat to Cairo's vital interests and security—particularly in Libya, where Turkish involvement in the civil war deepened significantly. As Türkiye intensified its engagement in the conflicts in Libya and Syria, tensions with Egypt escalated, rendering conflict a defining characteristic of their bilateral relations during this period.⁷² The broader Arab world also responded negatively to Türkiye's policies. Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait City, and Manama distanced themselves from Ankara, citing its perceived hostility and interference in Arab affairs.⁷³ Iran, despite being a frequent rival to many Gulf states, also expressed anger toward Türkiye owing to its continued threats against the Iranian-backed Assad regime in Syria.⁷⁴ Similarly, Iraq's relationship with Türkiye deteriorated as Turkish military incursions into northern Iraq persisted, further straining diplomatic ties.⁷⁵

Compounding these difficulties, the expansionist policies pursued by Erdoğan and the AKP significantly drained Türkiye's military, financial, political, and diplomatic resources.⁷⁶ As a result, Türkiye's pursuit of geopolitical influence undermined the economic growth it desperately needed, further complicating its strategic objectives. The significant economic, political, and diplomatic costs Türkiye faced, combined with the broader strategic failures of Islamist movements to gain or maintain power amid widespread public concern and rejection, compelled the Turkish ruling elite to reassess its Middle East policies.⁷⁷ Türkiye was obligated to recalibrate its approach, and it took steps to revive trade, investment, political cooperation, and diplomatic relations with Arab governments and Iran, ultimately rebuilding regional ties.

Between 2020 and 2023, Türkiye began a partial retreat from its unilateral support for armed Islamist groups in Syria. It took an active role in the Astana negotiation process with Russia and Iran, seeking political solutions to stabilize Damascus.⁷⁸ Türkiye also explored diplomatic relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime following Syria's return to the Arab League. However, Assad rejected Erdoğan's outreach because of Türkiye's ongoing support for Islamist groups and the continued presence of Turkish forces in northern Syria.⁷⁹

During this period, Türkiye eased its hostile stance toward Egypt, fostering joint security arrangements in Libya that brought relative stability.⁸⁰ It also engaged in security and diplomatic dialogue with Egypt, resulting in restrictions on Muslim Brotherhood propaganda against the Egyptian government.⁸¹ At the same time, it scaled back its military operations in Iraq and significantly reduced financial and military support for Islamist groups across the Middle East and North Africa. These moves improved relations with Gulf countries, Iraq, and Iran. Meanwhile, trade and investment with regional neighbors steadily increased.⁸²

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose authority was strengthened by constitutional changes transforming Türkiye into a presidential system, also sought to mend relations with Israel. Prior to October 7, 2023, he extended overtures to Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government, leading to the normalization of relations between the two countries.⁸³

Iran: Expanding Influence Through Proxy Networks

Before 2011, the Islamic Republic of Iran had positioned itself as a key beneficiary of the regional shifts following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Through its cultivation of allies—from Hezbollah in Lebanon to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and Shiite parties dominating Iraq's political landscape—Iran established a network of armed militias.⁸⁴ These groups not only served as a protective shield for Iran's security and interests against American and Israeli adversaries, but also as strategic assets leveraged in negotiations and regional power dynamics.

Between 2011 and 2023, Iran's regional strategy relied heavily on the use of military tools, both directly and through its proxies, to secure further strategic gains. Exploiting the fluid and unstable environment brought about by the Arab Spring uprisings, Tehran solidified its role as a power broker in the Middle East.⁸⁵

On one front, Iran reinforced its network of allies by supporting them against uprisings that threatened their authoritarian, sectarian, and corrupt regimes. Starting in 2011, Tehran provided critical support to Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, ensuring its survival during the civil war.⁸⁶ Similarly, Iran backed Hezbollah during the Lebanese protests of 2019–2021

and supported Iraq's ruling Shiite factions during the mass protests of 2019.⁸⁷ These efforts allowed Iran's allies to maintain their grip on power, ensuring their dominance in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq through 2023.

Iran also equipped its proxies to challenge U.S. and Israeli interests in the Middle East through a strategy designed to deter Washington and Tel Aviv from threatening Tehran's security, targeting its nuclear infrastructure, or undermining its allies' military capabilities. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) mobilized Shiite militias in Iraq to counter U.S. influence, while Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria actively targeted Israeli assets and interests.⁸⁸ This approach contributed to escalating regional confrontations, including Iranian-supported groups' attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria, the 2020 U.S. assassination of IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani, and prolonged hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel.⁸⁹

In Palestine, Iran adopted a hardline stance against Israel, calling for the destruction of the "Zionist entity."⁹⁰ It provided consistent military and logistical support to Hamas and other factions in Gaza, sidelining the Palestinian Authority and undermining its role as the official representative of Palestinian interests.⁹¹ This antagonistic approach fueled structural tensions with Egypt and Jordan, Israel's two Arab neighbors committed to peace initiatives and the pursuit of a two-state solution.

In Yemen, Iran expanded its influence through the Houthi movement, which rose to prominence during the civil war that followed the country's 2011 uprising. Tehran provided the Houthis with military, financial, and political support, securing their loyalty as a key proxy near Sunni strongholds and its rival, Saudi Arabia.⁹² The ensuing proxy war—fought between Iran-backed Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition, including the UAE and Bahrain—devastated Yemen.⁹³ From 2015 to 2023, this conflict claimed thousands of lives, displaced millions, and led to the severance of diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh in 2016. Relations with the UAE and Bahrain also deteriorated as Houthi missile and drone attacks targeted Saudi and Emirati territories.

Despite these challenges, Iran secured a strategic foothold in southern Arabia and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, linking the Gulf and Mediterranean waters to the southern Red Sea.⁹⁴ This unprecedented geographical reach enhanced Tehran's regional leverage but further destabilized Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, while intensifying security threats to Gulf Arab states, Egypt, and Jordan.

By 2020, Iran's aggressive policies and reliance on proxies had deepened its isolation. Its coalition included both authoritarian regimes, such as Assad's Syria, and militias like Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Hamas. These alliances placed Iran in direct conflict with the United States, Israel, and major regional powers, contributing to heightened instability and widespread hostility toward Tehran. Recognizing the unsustainable costs of a conflict-driven regional policy, Iran began recalibrating its approach between 2020 and 2023. This shift—similar to Türkiye's earlier pivot—sought to restore

calm in the region. By October 7, 2023, Iran had reestablished diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia through Chinese mediation, which facilitated relative stability in Yemen.⁹⁵ Iran also expanded trade and investment ties with the UAE and initiated limited political engagement with Egypt, signaling a strategic pivot aimed at reducing tensions and fostering regional cooperation.⁹⁶

Israel: Prioritizing Security Over Peace

Since its establishment in 1948, Israel consistently has been involved in military confrontations with its neighbors. In recent decades, Israeli politics have steadily shifted toward the extreme and religious right, which opposed the principle of “land for peace” and rejected the two-state solution as a viable means to resolve the Palestinian issue.⁹⁷ Successive right-wing governments intensified practices of occupation and settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem while maintaining a 2007-initiated blockade on the Gaza Strip, which steadily eroded the foundations of the peace process initiated by the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, the 1993 Oslo Accords, and the 1994 Wadi Araba Agreement with Jordan.⁹⁸

In 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative offered Israel full regional normalization in exchange for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and the return of occupied Arab territories.⁹⁹ This initiative built upon earlier frameworks, such as the Oslo Accords, which had sought to establish a roadmap for peace through mutual recognition and negotiation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Nevertheless, through 2011, Israeli governments increasingly abandoned the commitments of both initiatives, further diminishing prospects for a peaceful resolution. By intensifying the siege of Gaza, frequently engaging in military clashes with Hamas and allied factions and maintaining a “cold peace” with Egypt and Jordan, Israel systematically undermined any potential for long-term stability. Simultaneously, Israel refused to withdraw from the Syrian Golan Heights, engaged in military conflicts with Hezbollah—notably the 2006 war—and conducted repeated strikes against Iran’s allies, often in coordination with the United States.¹⁰⁰ Israel’s actions before 2011 perpetuated regional instability and weakened Tel Aviv’s ability to establish diplomatic and security agreements across the Middle East and North Africa.

In 2011, Israel confronted a volatile Middle Eastern landscape shaped by widespread uprisings and the rise of Islamist groups espousing strong anti-Israeli rhetoric and supporting Palestinian resistance factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad.¹⁰¹ These political upheavals toppled regimes in Tunisia and Egypt; plunged Libya, Syria, and Yemen into civil wars; and increased pressure on Jordan and Morocco to implement reforms.¹⁰² Regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Türkiye, and Iran, scrambled to secure their interests in this unstable environment.¹⁰³ Amidst these tumultuous times, rather than moderating its reliance on military force, halting its occupation, curbing settlement expansion, or lifting the blockade on Palestinian territories, Israel chose to unwaveringly pursue its customary policy

of military hegemony.¹⁰⁴ This course of action not only undermined any viable prospects for peace but also entrenched Israel's prioritization of security, sidelining engagement with the region's evolving dynamics. Concurrently, Israel intensified its unyielding pressure on Iran and its allies—both state and nonstate actors—perceiving them as existential threats to its national security.¹⁰⁵

As the wave of uprisings gradually receded and Islamist movements struggled to consolidate or retain power, regional attention pivoted toward the escalating threat posed by terrorist organizations in war-torn countries such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, as well as in politically unstable states like Iraq. In stark contrast to these shifting concerns, Israel's far-right governments, frequently under the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, remained resolute in their domestic and regional policies.¹⁰⁶

Between 2015 and 2023, Israel's Middle East policy was characterized by a dual strategy: an aggressive stance by far-right and religious governments toward Palestinians and Iran's allies, intertwined with a calculated openness toward select regional actors.¹⁰⁷ Israel conducted a series of targeted strikes against groups it deemed adversaries, focusing on Palestinian factions and Iranian-backed forces in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Concurrently, Israel pursued diplomatic and security engagements with select regional actors. The 2020 Abraham Accords ushered in a new era of normalized relations, trade agreements, and strategic cooperation.¹⁰⁸ Israel also forged bilateral counterterrorism agreements with Egypt and collaborated with Jordan and the UAE on water resource management.¹⁰⁹

Building upon this dual-strategy framework, successive Tel Aviv governments adeptly leveraged steadfast American support to advance their objectives, exploiting the absence of substantive U.S. and European commitment to the peace process and the two-state solution.¹¹⁰ Western powers' apparent apathy toward Palestinian suffering further facilitated this agenda, as their engagement with the Palestinian cause was confined predominantly to humanitarian, economic, and financial aid.¹¹¹ In stark contrast, diplomatic efforts by the West were directed toward deepening Israel's regional integration, focusing on security, diplomacy, trade, and investment.¹¹² This strategic prioritization sought to achieve broad Arab normalization with Israel, effectively circumventing a just resolution to the Palestinian question and disregarding the principles of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.¹¹³

Israel's strategic goal was clear: to marginalize the Palestinian cause entirely; erode any remaining prospects for peace or a two-state solution; and shift the regional agenda toward confronting Iran, containing its allies, combating terrorism, and establishing security alliances.¹¹⁴ These alliances included major Arab states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as Jordan and Türkiye, effectively redirecting focus away from the Palestinian issue to broader regional security concerns.

Such was the state of Israeli policies and the conditions of the leading Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Türkiye, and Iran—before October 7, 2023.¹¹⁵ Civil wars and localized military conflicts persisted, and regional players seemingly abandoned the

Palestinians. Regional actors adopted varied strategies to increase regional security: Saudi Arabia sought to ease tensions with Iran, the UAE focused on deepening cooperation with Israel, Egypt prioritized national security amidst domestic challenges, and Türkiye reduced its engagement in regional conflicts. Each nation pursued regional strategies using various tools, yet none succeeded in fostering collective security or comprehensive stability.

The Explosion and Its Aftermath: October 7, 2023

The Hamas attacks on October 7 and Israel's subsequent military response ignited the powder keg of the Middle East, centering the region's enduring conflicts once again on Palestine. This eruption dismantled efforts at appeasement, openness, and containment while exposing the fragility of ongoing mediation and negotiation processes. What followed was an escalation of direct and proxy wars involving numerous stakeholders, including Israel, Iran, Türkiye, and a range of armed groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Syrian factions.

Repeated diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict have faltered, leaving the region precariously balanced on the brink of catastrophe. Driven by the unyielding ambitions of key regional powers—most notably Israel and Iran—the war has unleashed devastating consequences.¹¹⁶ The resulting human suffering and material destruction have not only drained regional resources but also eroded the fragile remnants of stability, rendering any prospects for peace and sustainable development increasingly unattainable.

Since October 2023, Israeli actions have escalated beyond systematic violence against Palestinians, reflecting a broader regional agenda. In Lebanon, Israeli military operations have endangered civilian lives, devastated infrastructure, and undermined sovereignty under the pretext of neutralizing Hezbollah militarily, financially, and organizationally; removing it from the border area; and cutting off its access to Iranian weapons.¹¹⁷ In Syria, relentless Israeli strikes targeting Iran's military presence have accelerated the dissolution of the Assad regime, leaving the nation in a state of anarchy dominated by competing armed factions.¹¹⁸ At the same time, Israel's confrontations with the Houthis in Yemen have escalated tensions in the Red Sea, jeopardizing maritime security and further destabilizing the region.¹¹⁹ In short, in relying on military dominance as a principal policy tool, Israel is advancing its immediate security objectives but helping to perpetuate instability across the Middle East.

Even as Israel's actions have exacerbated regional instability, Iran's role in the region similarly has contributed to the deterioration of peace and security. Between 2011 and 2020, Iranian policies helped destabilize Arab states such as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as its reliance on militias to execute its regional aims played into the ongoing conflict.¹²⁰ Tehran

positions itself as both a protagonist and antagonist in the region. Despite its overt ideological animosity toward Israel, Iran's actions—particularly its military entrenchment across Arab states—have only intensified the broader conflict, further endangering the Middle East as a whole.

The October 7 attacks represented a key moment, underscoring Iran's and Israel's parallel reliance on military force in addressing conflicts that demand political solutions. Through its weapons and logistical support, Iran facilitated Hamas's unprecedented assault while enabling rocket and drone strikes by Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Shiite militias in Iraq.¹²¹ Framed as "support" for Palestinian resistance, these actions were designed to provoke Tel Aviv and escalate regional tensions, further entrenching a cycle of violence. Iran's sponsorship of armed groups beyond its borders and its blatant disregard for the sovereignty of Arab nations under its influence mirrors the extremism of Israel's far-right policies. The interplay between Iran and Israel has entrenched the Middle East in a protracted war of attrition, with mutual escalations perpetuating instability and an unrelenting cycle of violence.¹²²

Israel's simultaneous campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon have yielded significant yet deeply contentious outcomes, with both military and humanitarian ramifications. The staggering toll on human life and the widespread devastation in Gaza, as well as in Shiite-majority areas of Lebanon, highlight the cost of these operations.¹²³ From a strategic standpoint, however, the conflict has crippled much of Hamas's military infrastructure and its allied Palestinian factions, and depleted Hezbollah's stockpiles of Iranian-supplied rockets and weaponry.

Beyond these tactical gains, Israel has targeted key leadership figures within Hamas and Hezbollah, weakening their organizational and political influence, which may diminish their sway over Palestinian territories and Lebanon. Additionally, the conflict has helped create demilitarized zones in northern Gaza and southern Lebanon, albeit through forced displacements.¹²⁴ This systemic upheaval in Gaza has paved the way for even broader threats of large-scale displacement, while ongoing pressures in the West Bank and East Jerusalem—manifested through occupation, settlement expansion, and apartheid policies—continue to marginalize Palestinian rights and stifle international advocacy.¹²⁵

As the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon spiraled out into the region, Israel escalated its offensives against Iran and its proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, responding to mounting attacks from the Iranian bloc.¹²⁶ This escalation reached a critical juncture with the fall of the Assad regime by the end of 2024—a development that delivered a significant blow to Iranian influence.¹²⁷ With Syria no longer serving as a conduit for Iranian military and financial support to Hezbollah, Israel achieved a strategic milestone, effectively isolating Iran's most formidable ally in the region. Now, Israel's primary focus remains countering the Shiite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen, further limiting Iran's regional leverage and narrowing its strategic options.

Netanyahu, in his characteristic arrogance, has portrayed these developments as part of a "new Middle East" dominated by Israeli power.¹²⁸ Using platforms such as the UN, he has

promoted maps and narratives depicting a polarized region of “forces of good and evil,” erasing the concept of a Palestinian state and denying the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination. However, despite Israel’s apparent rise in regional influence—buoyed by the weakening of the Iranian axis, Türkiye’s redirection of its priorities, and the strategic disarray among Arab states—Netanyahu failed to secure a definitive victory in the protracted conflict.¹²⁹ Israel was embroiled in a war for over a year that spiraled beyond its control until the ceasefire agreement took effect on January 19, 2025.¹³⁰ Doubts remain as to whether the ceasefire will truly resolve the deadly, protracted, and expansionist war.

Netanyahu and his far-right coalition are trapped by the very wars and extremist vision they have perpetuated.¹³¹ Despite their military and security accomplishments, they lack the means to bring these conflicts to a conclusive end. They have left Israel increasingly isolated in a “new Middle East” that offers few substantive allies, a set of circumstances that highlights the challenges of achieving dominance through militarized policies. What is more, for Netanyahu to achieve his objectives in Palestine and Lebanon, he would need the support of entities willing to accept unconditional surrender, enabling Israel to consolidate control over Gaza, intensify settler activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and dismantle Hezbollah both militarily and politically. Yet such Palestinian and Lebanese entities do not exist. Even if they did, they would lack the political legitimacy and societal cohesion necessary to impose an “Israeli-style” peace.

To secure broader regional hegemony, Netanyahu envisions a scenario in which Iran’s complete military and strategic collapse leaves the Islamic Republic incapable of supporting its allied governments, movements, and militias within the region. However, this vision remains a distant prospect. Despite significant setbacks such as the collapse of Hamas, the weakening of Hezbollah, and the fall of the Assad regime, Iran continues to pursue its concerted efforts to rebuild its network of influence.¹³² It remains steadfast in supporting its allies near Israel and reinforcing its militias in Iraq and Yemen, thereby sustaining its regional leverage and thwarting Israel’s ambitions.

Netanyahu’s coalition also faces the absence of regional partners willing to endorse his divisive “good versus evil” paradigm for the Middle East. No allies are prepared to accept the permanent suppression of Palestinian statehood, the enduring subjugation of the Palestinian people, or Israel’s repeated encroachments on the sovereignty and rights of neighboring Arab nations. Furthermore, Israel’s actions pose direct threats to the national interests of Egypt and Jordan, particularly through the risk of forced Palestinian displacement into their territories.¹³³ Consequently, Israel’s relationships with its two peace treaty partners are under considerable strain. Netanyahu’s strategy threatens to entrench a prolonged cycle of violence, destruction, and instability. Even with a ceasefire signed, the impact of the war remains palpable and the threat of continued violence persists.

Iran’s own diplomatic and economic gains from the truce policies pursued between 2020 and 2023—including restored relations with Saudi Arabia, revitalized trade with the UAE, and emerging dialogues with Egypt and Jordan—also have eroded under the wartime

strains.¹³⁴ Repeated Iranian strategic retreats have undermined its broader regional ambitions. Nevertheless, it would be premature to suggest that the Islamic Republic is on the brink of a full retreat from the Levant. Despite the challenges it faces today, Iran remains likely to leverage its military, financial, and organizational assets to rebuild cohesion among its proxies in Palestine and Lebanon; reinforce factions in Iraq and Yemen; and adapt to the situation in Syria.¹³⁵

Caught between Israel's strategic gains and the substantial losses sustained by Iran and its allies, the regional fortunes of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Türkiye have become both promising and precarious in the aftermath of October 2023. As secondary actors in this broader conflict, these nations face the challenging task of navigating a landscape where their responses will shape both their own trajectories and the evolving balance of power in the Middle East.

Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Ankara were unified in their calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Gaza and Lebanon over the past year and more, along with an end to all military operations in the region.¹³⁶ They have collectively rejected Israeli plans for displacement, settlement expansion, and the systematic violation of Lebanese sovereignty, while emphasizing the need to protect the Palestinian cause.¹³⁷ They also have taken active steps to provide humanitarian relief to the affected Palestinian and Lebanese populations and have coordinated diplomatically to press global powers to intervene decisively in quelling the violence across the Middle East.

For Egypt, the ongoing war of attrition presents three profound challenges to its national security and its longstanding regional role. The first critical threat stems from the potential forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza. Although this is no longer overtly advocated by Israel's far-right and religious government, it remains a plausible scenario. Should the devastated Gaza Strip become uninhabitable, more than two million Palestinians could be pushed toward the Egyptian border. Aware of this peril, Cairo has proactively engaged in regional and international diplomatic efforts to reject such outcomes.¹³⁸ These measures have pressured Benjamin Netanyahu's government to publicly disavow displacement plans, a commitment that Egypt must continue to safeguard through persistent and strategic diplomacy.

The second significant threat emerges from the shifting nature of Tel Aviv's policies. Despite the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979 and established diplomatic relations, Israel's current leadership is no longer a reliable partner for regional peace or diplomacy aimed at resolving conflicts. This shift undermines Egypt's established strategy of leveraging cooperative frameworks to ensure stability, complicating Cairo's security calculations and its broader regional role. Israel's ongoing war in Gaza, its obstruction of humanitarian aid, and its disregard for Egypt's red lines—such as preserving the Philadelphi Corridor as a demilitarized zone and maintaining Palestinian control over the Rafah crossing—have placed its peace with Egypt in a crisis.¹³⁹ Netanyahu's repeated rejection of the two-state solution and his denial of the viability of an independent Palestinian state have rendered Egypt's efforts to promote regional peace and stability increasingly untenable.¹⁴⁰

A third, equally pressing threat to Egypt stems from the broader regional instability, amplified by precarious conditions along its other borders. To the south, Egypt faces the aforementioned repercussions of Sudan's civil war, heightened tensions at the southern entrance to the Red Sea, challenges in the Horn of Africa, and unresolved disputes with Ethiopia over water rights and security concerns.¹⁴¹ To the west, Libya's persistent civil conflict adds to the pressure. This rapidly evolving landscape threatens Egypt's ability to maintain its carefully crafted foreign policy strategy and undermines its capacity to act effectively within both its immediate and its extended regional neighborhood.

Between 2020 and 2023, Türkiye embarked on a significant shift in its foreign policy, moving away from the expansionist ambitions rooted in its Ottoman and Islamist past. This recalibration aimed to rebuild constructive relations with its neighbors and reduce involvement in regional conflicts. In the aftermath of the October 2023 explosion of regional violence, Türkiye demonstrated its commitment to this new approach by extending humanitarian and political support to the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples.¹⁴² Coordinating closely with key Arab powers—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—Ankara worked to exert pressure on the Israeli government to halt its military operations and end the war.¹⁴³

Türkiye actively engaged in regional and international conferences focused on achieving a ceasefire in Palestine and Lebanon, promoting a peaceful resolution to the Palestinian issue based on the two-state solution, and mitigating hostilities across the Middle East. Erdoğan played a prominent role, attending summits organized by Cairo and Riyadh, where he delivered impassioned speeches supporting Palestinian and Arab rights.¹⁴⁴ He condemned Tel Aviv's war crimes, occupation policies, and settlement expansion, while emphasizing Türkiye's readiness to play a stabilizing role in securing peace in Palestine and the broader Arab Levant after the conflict.¹⁴⁵ This diplomatic engagement, the first dimension of Türkiye's response to the October 2023 crisis, aligned with its broader policy of reducing tensions and prioritizing peaceful solutions.

The second dimension of Türkiye's post-October 2023 policy unfolded in Syria during the latter part of 2024, reflecting a shift toward a more assertive, proxy-based military strategy. Ankara focused on supporting armed militias and allied groups in their efforts to overthrow the Assad regime in Damascus.¹⁴⁶ This strategy was designed to reshape the balance of power in the Syrian capital to safeguard Türkiye's multifaceted security interests. Türkiye capitalized on several factors: the weakening of Iranian deterrence and its regional allies, particularly Hezbollah, following successive military strikes; Russia's distraction with the ongoing war in Ukraine; and the diminished organizational capabilities of pro-Iranian forces. Ankara directed its proxies, particularly Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, to intensify operations against the Assad regime.¹⁴⁷ Simultaneously, it tasked the Syrian National Army with increasing military pressure on Kurdish groups in northeastern Syria. This dual-pronged approach sought to eliminate Tehran's influence in Damascus—a city of immense historical and strategic importance to Türkiye—while addressing Ankara's deep-seated concerns about its perceived existential threat of Kurdish militancy. Additionally, this strategy supported Türkiye's domestic priorities, aiming to pave the way for the repatriation of millions of Syrian refugees

currently residing within its borders.¹⁴⁸ By leveraging both military and diplomatic tools, Türkiye seeks to redefine its regional role, balancing assertive actions in Syria with a commitment to fostering stability in Palestine and the wider Middle East.

The new war of attrition has disrupted the carefully calibrated regional agendas of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, despite their shared interest with Egypt and Türkiye in halting conflicts and pursuing peaceful resolutions.

Before October 2023, Saudi Arabia had been steadily distancing itself from regional conflicts, especially in Yemen, and had begun normalizing relations with Tehran in exchange for security guarantees.¹⁴⁹ Riyadh redirected its financial, political, and diplomatic resources toward its ambitious Vision 2030 modernization project, aiming to transform the kingdom's economy and global standing. This strategy followed two complementary paths; on one front, Riyadh sought to strengthen its strategic alliance with the United States, engaging in dialogue to secure security guarantees, including potential support for a peaceful nuclear program. Concurrently, it explored normalization with Israel, contingent on Israeli acceptance of a Palestinian state.¹⁵⁰ On the other front, Saudi Arabia diversified its international relationships by forging partnerships with China and Russia, in order to reduce its reliance on Washington while enhancing geopolitical leverage through military, trade, technological, and investment collaborations.¹⁵¹

However, the outbreak of new hostilities disrupted these efforts. The violent escalation across Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the southern Red Sea has diverted Riyadh's focus from its modernization goals. It also exposed Saudi Arabia to unexpected risks, such as the collapse of the Assad regime, which added unforeseen complications to Riyadh's bid to maintain regional stability while advancing its global priorities.

The UAE faced similar disruptions to its foreign policy agenda. Prior to October 2023, Abu Dhabi withdrew from Yemen, redirecting its attention to other conflict zones and deepening its diplomatic, trade, and security ties with Israel.¹⁵² Concurrently, the UAE sought to consolidate its regional and international alliances, projecting influence through strategic partnerships. Yet the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, coupled with Israel's rejection of the two-state solution, presented significant challenges. Abu Dhabi attempted to leverage its close relationship with Tel Aviv to push for a ceasefire, facilitate humanitarian aid, and build regional consensus on governance for postwar Gaza and Lebanon.¹⁵³ Despite its efforts, the UAE struggled to achieve meaningful concessions from Israel, even though it was the only Arab state that expressed a willingness to participate in a peacekeeping force in Gaza after the war.¹⁵⁴

Further complicating matters, Abu Dhabi faced difficulty mitigating tensions between Israel and Iran. Even with strong diplomatic ties to Tehran, the escalating hostilities undermined Abu Dhabi's efforts to shield the Gulf from the fallout of the broader conflict. The unexpected collapse of Assad's regime, a development the UAE had not anticipated given its role in Syria's reintegration into the Arab League, further destabilized the region.¹⁵⁵ This dramatic shift forced the UAE to confront the resurgence of armed militias aligned

with political Islam—an ideology it considers the greatest security threat to the Middle East. The evolving power dynamics in Syria and the broader regional turmoil highlighted vulnerabilities in Abu Dhabi’s foreign policy, exposing its challenges in navigating an increasingly volatile Middle East.

Opportunities for Collective Security in the Middle East

The Middle East finds itself at a crossroads, confronting a fundamental question: how can the region bring an end to the protracted war of attrition and establish a comprehensive security framework that alleviates tensions, prevents future conflicts, and lays the groundwork for lasting peace and stability?

The current regional landscape is defined by relentless violence; extensive destruction; the repeated collapse of nation-states; and stagnant economic, social, and political development. Compounding this bleak reality is a burgeoning youth population deprived of essential human security. These young generations, often disillusioned and left with few prospects, are being driven toward radicalism, violence, or illegal migration—an unfortunate fate that can only be averted by restoring stability and fostering hope.¹⁵⁶

Some ruling elites and civil society groups place their faith in global powers—such as the United States, China, Russia, or the European Union—to intervene and stabilize the region. However, the reality is far from encouraging. Although the Middle East’s geostrategic location, energy resources, and wealth render it indispensable to global politics, external powers often have adopted a fragmented, reactive approach. The United States and China seem primarily concerned with safeguarding their immediate interests, often through piecemeal, temporary measures aimed at managing crises rather than resolving them. Meanwhile, Russia and the European Union, grappling with diminishing regional influence, appear focused on salvaging their remaining stakes. Collectively, these powers lack a cohesive vision or sustained policy framework capable of addressing the structural challenges that perpetuate the Middle East’s cycles of conflict. Whether from reluctance, incapacity, or competing priorities, all seem ill-equipped to undertake the monumental task of stabilizing the region and fostering enduring peace.

This state of affairs points to an undeniable reality: the responsibility for ending the conflicts and forging a path toward stability now rests on the shoulders of the region’s major actors. If these powers—Tel Aviv, Tehran, and Ankara, alongside Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi—are determined to reject the status quo, they must take proactive steps to reshape the Middle East’s future. The intricate interplay of gains and losses, opportunities and risks, may compel

them to explore the potential for collective security arrangements. Such frameworks could serve as a foundation to reduce tensions, mitigate conflicts, and open avenues for peaceful settlements and long-term stability.

The willingness of these regional powers to embrace collaboration will determine whether the Middle East can transcend its cycles of violence and emerge as a more stable, cooperative entity in an increasingly dynamic and unpredictable global landscape. The stakes have never been higher, and the region's ability to chart its own course has never been more critical.

Even though Israel has emerged as a strategic winner in the current Middle East conflict—with Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and their allies substantially weakened—it is in a precarious position. The necessity of sustaining military strikes to prevent the “axis of resistance” from resuming rocket and drone attacks perpetuates instability. At the same time, policies such as reoccupying Gaza, considering scenarios of forced displacement, expanding settlements in the West Bank, maintaining a presence in Lebanese territory, and conducting continued aggressions toward Syria fail to create lasting security or stability. Moreover, these actions hinder normalization efforts with its regional neighbors. Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right and religious government, while persistently advancing divisive rhetoric and punitive strategies against Iran and its allies, is likely aware that other regional powers, such as Türkiye—focused on curtailing Iranian influence in Syria—are not invested in overthrowing the Islamic Republic or dismantling Iran as a state.

For Israel to break free from the cycle of perpetual conflict, it must abandon policies rooted in coercion and unilateral dominance. This includes reevaluating its refusal to recognize Palestinian self-determination and the viability of a two-state solution. Instead, Israel should actively pursue regional consensus aimed at peaceful settlements, collective security arrangements, and the delineation of mutually respected boundaries and spheres of influence. Such a shift would not only foster long-term stability and security but also open pathways to genuine normalization with its neighbors. Without this strategic recalibration, Israel risks remaining entrenched in an unending conflict that undermines both regional peace and its own long-term interests.

In the aftermath of October 7, 2023, Iran has emerged as the most significant strategic loser, facing a decline that appears ever more irreversible. Traditional strategies to regain influence—such as reasserting the power of its allies in Gaza and Lebanon, rallying remnants of the Assad regime in Syria, or deploying Iraqi and Yemeni militias in cross-border operations against Israel—have proven inadequate. The direct involvement of the IRGC and the utilization of Iran's arsenal in the ongoing conflicts have only deepened its challenges, compounding rather than alleviating its predicament.

The leadership of the Islamic Republic, as reflected in public statements by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other senior officials, is aware of the multiple actors capitalizing on its waning influence.¹⁵⁷ These include Tel Aviv as well as regional powers like Ankara and Riyadh. The once-potent narrative of the “axis of resistance” has crumbled under

the pressures of conflict, destruction, and Israel's overwhelming military superiority. The ideological and political appeal of this narrative has eroded, leaving Tehran increasingly vulnerable and isolated in the region. For Iran to secure its future, a fundamental shift in its approach is imperative. Building regional consensus is now critical to safeguard its national security and protect essential interests, including the survival of the Islamic Republic, the continuation of its nuclear program, and the preservation of its remaining alliances. Without such a recalibration, Tehran risks exacerbating the devastating consequences of the war of attrition, deepening its isolation, and accelerating the decline of its influence in a region increasingly aligned against it.

Türkiye, which oscillated between Ottomanist aspirations and Islamist policies from 2011 to 2020 before shifting its regional approach between 2020 and 2023, now stands poised to consolidate a series of strategic gains. These include significant achievements in Syria, where it has capitalized on Iran's diminishing influence in the Arab Mashreq, as well as successful diplomatic coordination with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. Moreover, Türkiye has maintained a dual approach toward Israel—publicly condemning its actions while engaging in covert military and operational cooperation in Syria.

Despite these successes, Erdoğan and his government recognize the challenges of translating short-term victories into sustainable long-term objectives. To integrate Turkish-backed militias into governance structures in Damascus, exert effective pressure on Kurdish factions Ankara considers terrorist, facilitate the return of millions of Syrian refugees from Turkish soil, and spearhead reconstruction efforts in war-torn areas, Türkiye must engage in coordinated efforts with key regional powers: Iran, Israel, Egypt, and Gulf States.

Iran, despite its current vulnerabilities, retains significant influence in the Arab Mashreq. Israel's military-dominated posture remains a defining factor in regional dynamics. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have the financial and political capital that will be needed to shape outcomes in Syria and the broader Levant. Egypt's indispensable role in mitigating regional instability, alongside its critical stake in Gaza and the Palestinian cause, further underscores its importance in any framework for peace. For Ankara, success lies in harmonizing these multifaceted partnerships, capitalizing on its unique geopolitical position, and adeptly balancing competing interests to advance its strategic objectives. Such an approach will be central to Türkiye's ability to assert its influence and shape the contours of the emerging Middle Eastern order.

As for other major regional players—both winners and losers in the current Middle Eastern war of attrition—their roles must now shift toward fostering collective security to end conflicts and initiate peaceful settlements.

For Egypt, the stakes are particularly high. Its borders adjoin crisis zones on all fronts, introducing additional national security threats. These include the fallout from Israeli incursions into Gaza, a regional arms race, and the socioeconomic strain of integrating refugees. The economic impact is also significant, with declining revenues from the Suez Canal adding

to the burden.¹⁵⁸ Since October 2023, Cairo has undertaken significant efforts to mitigate regional instability, forging collaborations with key partners such as Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi while maintaining a cautious diplomatic approach toward Tehran and demonstrating considerable strategic restraint with Tel Aviv. Despite Egypt's vital role as a mediator in efforts to end the war in Gaza, plan postconflict scenarios, and refocus global attention on the Palestinian cause and the two-state solution, its relationship with Israel has come under considerable strain. The source of the strain is Tel Aviv's persistent intransigence, including its refusal to permit humanitarian aid into Gaza, its unwillingness to transfer control of the Rafah crossing to Palestinian authorities, and its military incursions into the demilitarized Philadelphi Corridor.

All regional actors share a crucial interest in establishing a collective security framework encompassing arenas such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Without it, the persistent cycle of conflict will continue to endanger both regional and global interests. Within this context, the visions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while closely aligned with Egypt's emphasis on stability and collective security, reflect distinct national priorities shaped by their unique geopolitical and strategic objectives.

For Saudi Arabia, the focus remains on advancing its Vision 2030 modernization agenda while safeguarding its resources from unresolved regional tensions. Riyadh seeks to maintain calm with Iran, stabilize the Arab Mashreq, and pursue strategic dialogues with the United States on peaceful nuclear programs and regional normalization efforts. Yet Washington's insistence on conditioning such agreements on normalization with Israel—without addressing Palestinian rights or the two-state solution—undermines Saudi ambitions. This challenge is compounded by the difficulty of insulating Saudi resources from the turbulence in the Levant in the face of direct and proxy conflicts between Israel, Iran, and Türkiye. Without a robust collective security arrangement, Riyadh's ability to shield itself from regional fallout while focusing on its domestic and strategic priorities will remain under threat. The Kingdom's vision, therefore, hinges on forging broader regional cooperation to address these challenges and achieve lasting peace.

The UAE, having ended its military involvement in Yemen, has redirected its focus toward influencing civil conflicts in Sudan and Libya while maintaining close ties with Israel. However, Abu Dhabi is increasingly concerned about the fallout from the Assad regime's collapse, the resurgence of Islamist groups in Syria, and the competition among Türkiye, Iran, and Israel in the Arab Mashreq. To mitigate these risks, the UAE is exploring collaborations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt to stabilize Syria and the broader Levant.¹⁵⁹ It also seeks to influence postwar scenarios in Gaza, positioning itself as a pragmatic player capable of bridging divides and advancing a cooperative regional framework.

Despite shared interests, significant obstacles hinder efforts to establish collective security in the Middle East. Chief among these are regional actors' continued reliance on military tools, support for armed militias, and interference in the internal affairs of other states. Such practices erode trust and exacerbate divisions, making it difficult to build a shared vision

for peace. The erosion of foundational principles such as “land for peace” and the persistent prioritization of force over dialogue have compounded these challenges.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia stand out as exceptions to this trend, having refrained from direct or proxy military involvement in the current conflicts. However, other key players, including Israel, Iran, Türkiye, and the UAE, continue to wield military capabilities in ways that perpetuate cycles of violence and delay meaningful collective action. The only viable solution lies in replacing militarism with a framework of collective security based on dialogue, pacification, and peaceful settlements.

To advance this vision, Egypt and Saudi Arabia must take the lead in launching a regional security grouping modeled after the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This initiative would invite participation from all Middle Eastern states and regional organizations, such as the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council, under the following commitments:

1. **Noninterference:** Respect for the sovereignty of states and adherence to noninterference in internal affairs.
2. **Peaceful Conflict Resolution:** Adoption of dialogue, negotiation, and consensus-building to resolve tensions and conflicts.
3. **End to Militarism:** A commitment to cease direct and proxy military interventions, halt support for armed militias, and refrain from employing force as a policy tool.
4. **Support for Self-Determination:** Efforts to end occupation, dismantle settlements, and lift blockades to enable peoples seeking self-determination to achieve it within realistic frameworks.
5. **Nation-State Building and Consolidation:** Initiatives to rebuild and stabilize fragmented or collapsed states across the Middle East and to end the presence of militarized nonstate actors and terrorist militias.

This framework would address the root causes of instability while fostering mutual cooperation and reducing tensions. By prioritizing collective security, the initiative would offer a pathway to resolving entrenched conflicts and promoting sustainable development across the region.

The first test of this regional security grouping should be to restore the Palestinian cause as a matter of self-determination and the right to an independent state. Simultaneously, the framework should endeavor to shape Syria’s future free from the dominance of armed groups and external military interventions. If successful, these efforts could set the stage for a broader transformation of the Middle Eastern order, steering it toward a sustainable and cooperative future.

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Notes

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