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THE AXIS UNDONE

Tehran's Regional Setbacks and Diplomatic Pivot

Alexandra Nikopoulou

For the past year and a half, Iran has been progressively losing power and influence across the Middle East, mainly due to its indirect involvement in the Gaza war and the strategic shortcomings of its renowned Resistance Axis alliance. This rollback in Iranian power stems from Tehran's backing of the Palestinian issue and the particularly active role of its allies in challenging Tel Aviv – aimed at reviving support from the Arab Street and maintaining regional relevance. However, the failure of this strategy has led both the Islamic Republic and its allies to sustain significant damage – militarily, logistically, and in terms of their status as regional counterbalances to Israel. The retreat of the pro-Iranian Axis has deeper consequences, essentially undoing years of Tehran's strategic planning and network formation. Iran is now in a position of reevaluating its long-term strategy, adapting to a grim regional environment, and assessing the cost of essential concessions that could help it escape its current deadlock.

The cost of the Gaza war and Israel's expanding fronts

SINCE OCTOBER 2023 and the eruption of the Gaza war, Iran has engaged in a dangerous – and, as proven, costly – effort to expand its regional influence by supporting the Palestinian people. Although this strategy had been effective in the past, Israel's inability to end the war and resolve the hostages issue led Tel Aviv to open new fronts against Iran and its allies, aiming to relieve internal pressure and contain dissent. This strategic environment has complicated matters for Tehran: its allies have been weakened, it has faced sustained Israeli challenges, and it was eventually drawn into direct confrontation with Israel via missile exchanges in October 2024. The situation for the pro-Iranian Axis of Resistance has followed a similar pattern. Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other Iranian-aligned groups rallied behind the Palestinian cause, only to encounter fierce Israeli retaliation.

The war between Hezbollah and Israel in southern Lebanon, bombings of pro-Shiite groups in Syria, the fall of Assad and the escalation with the Houthis in the Red Sea all exemplify the gradual weakening of the Iranian Axis. While the Houthis initially succeeded in damage control – at least until the recent escalation with US airstrikes across Yemen – both Hezbollah and Iran's logistical lines across the Levant have suffered serious damage, undermining Tehran's influence in a region it had dominated for over 15 years.

The power dynamics in the Middle East up until 2023 were shaped by complex processes that had unfolded since the mid-2010s. Iran's strategy to build a pro-Iranian Axis was first articulated in detail under President Ahmadinejad, and the Islamic Republic invested heavily in its foreign policy to develop this network over the course of at least a decade. The network was solidified during the period of the Arab Spring, when it was also enhanced by the addition of the Houthis. Despite multiple setbacks over the years, Iran managed to assert its role as a regional power and create a sphere of influence—even amid fierce competition with Saudi Arabia, which culminated in the restoration of diplomatic ties in 2023. But the Gaza war and Iran's support for the Palestinians disrupted this established order. Tehran's network proved far more fragile than previously assumed, quickly exposed to Israel's attacks and increasing US pressure.

The second Trump term and the return to maximum pressure

The second term of the Trump administration and the President's proclaimed goal of continuing its maximum pressure strategy

against Iran, further weakened Tehran's regional standing.¹ Washington initiated this renewed period of escalation by launching an intense air campaign against Houthi positions across Yemen, hoping that pressure towards the group would restore security in the Red Sea, but most importantly would push Iran to the negotiating table. Although the Houthis maintain their own agenda and a significant level of independence from their allies in Tehran, it seems



that Trump's strategy, albeit flawed, created another front and coincided with Iran's decision to open official negotiation channels with Washington. This does not suggest that the US strategy against the Houthis was particularly effective, nor that Iran had not been in communication with US officials prior to the assumption of the Presidency by D. Trump. However, the gradual weakening of Iran, coupled with prolonged insecurity and a shifting balance of power against Iranian interests created new conditions for a negotiation between Tehran and Washington. It seems that what four years of Biden's seemingly modest approach failed to achieve, Trump's aggressive (non-) strategy accomplished in just a few months.

In the beginning of April 2025, it was revealed that the US held indirect talks with Iran in Oman in a "productive" and "positive" atmosphere.² The talks focused on Iran's nuclear program, as rumors about Tehran's ability to produce a bomb swirled.³ While Trump threatened military action against Iran if a deal is not signed, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Aragchi emphasized the mutual willingness to reach tangible outcomes.⁴ Since then, a total of four rounds of talks have been held, with a fifth delayed due to logistical reasons as of the time of writing. Iranian officials have made significant overtures towards the Trump administration by marking the 2015 JCPOA deal as insufficient and accusing Biden-era officials of undermining the current process by framing it as a return to the original agreement.⁵ Aragchi also voiced Tehran's openness to collaborate with the US, blaming past American administrations for previous deadlocks. The Iranian Foreign Minister also hailed the importance of a deal in bringing foreign investors in Iran to "revitalize the struggling nuclear industry of the US".⁶ Even the Supreme Leader Khamenei has employed a discourse of "heroic flexibility" and Iran's history of making temporary concessions to achieve long-term goals.⁷ This narrative seems to be the main tool in justifying Iran's strategic shift, motivated by the Republic's willingness to escape costly US sanctions and bounce back from years of economic grievances and popular dissent.

The new geopolitical reality has left Iran and its allies with few strategic options. While the Houthis have demonstrated resilience, they too have sustained significant damage. Hezbollah has lost key leadership figures, undermining organizational stability. These shifts in the regional balance of power have pushed Iran toward strategic concessions and a renewed emphasis on diplomacy – even in the face of Trump's escalating rhetoric. That rhetoric, in fact, may have been designed precisely to bring Iran to the negotiating table. And it seems that the Islamic Republic has responded well to this "invitation". Although weakened, Iran has recalibrated its strategy to avoid direct confrontations, instead pursuing its long-term goal of regional hegemony through indirect means.



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ISRAEL

REACTIVE POLITICS TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Christina Fytili

This analysis examines Israel's geopolitical role in the Middle East, emphasizing its military dominance but limited capacity to shape the region. Israel has consistently relied on military strength, technological advancements, and tactical alliances to repel threats but lacks the soft power, economic leverage, and ideological appeal necessary to lead the region. This article argues that while successfully defending itself and neutralizing its threats, Israel's approach remained reactive rather than proactive, as evidenced by its handling of the Gaza conflict. However, Israel's policies following the war suggest a shift toward a more proactive engagement with ongoing regional priorities.



THROUGHOUT PREVIOUS DECADES, Israel stood as one of the most militarily and technologically advanced states in the Middle East. However, it never emerged as a true regional leader. Unlike historical regional powers, such as Egypt or Iran, which shaped the geopolitical landscape, either by using their military capabilities, economic and political alliances or ideology, Israel's role has been largely reactive, focused on preventing hostile actors from gaining dominance rather than influencing regional trajectory.

Surrounded by hostile Arab states that refused to recognize its legitimacy, Israel had to rely heavily on US military and economic backing. Despite its efforts, Israel lacked significant regional alliances, such as the periphery doctrine with Turkey and Iran.¹ The Arab-Israeli wars and the conflicts with Hezbollah and Hamas reinforced its military strength, but also exposed its strategic limitations: Israel could defend itself, but not decisively shape the political order in the Middle East.²

Nevertheless, Israel's military strength remains a vital pillar of its strategy. Its armed forces are among the most technologically advanced in the world, equipped with cutting-edge systems, including Iron Dome and David's Sling. These assets enable Israel to exercise hard power, particularly against non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah. This emphasis on deterrence underscores a strategic aim to maintain the status quo and prevent the emergence of rival regional powers.

At the core of Israel's strategic objectives is the elimination of its existential threats. Iran, with its nuclear ambitions and network of regional proxies, represents Israel's most pressing challenge. In response, Israel employs a doctrine of layered containment, consisting of intelligence operations, preemptive strikes on Iranian assets in Syria and Iraq, and ongoing diplomatic lobbying to preserve global pressure on Tehran. The April 2024 escalation marked a significant shift from proxy conflict to direct confrontation, when Iran launched a direct missile and drone assault and Israel retaliated inside Iranian territory.³

Economically, Israel pursues innovation-driven growth to enhance both its security and international standing. Known as the "Startup Nation", Israel leads in sectors such as cybersecurity, water technology, and defense industries. Its capacity to attract foreign direct investment and develop globally competitive technologies contributes to its regional weight.⁴ While Israel maintained its customs union with Turkey since 1996, it also expanded its economic outreach, as a result of the Abraham Accords, establishing a customs union and deepening trade relationships with the UAE. However, these efforts have not fostered deep regional integration. Even cooperative economic zones with Jordan and Egypt, such as the Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZs), have produced limited engagement due to persistent political and societal barriers.

Israel also seeks strategic alliances to bolster its geopolitical depth. The Abraham Accords reflected a tactical alignment with the Gulf states against Iranian influence, but these relations remain functional rather than transformational. Similarly, Israel's partnerships with Egypt and Jordan are driven by shared security concerns, not ideological convergence.⁵ Globally, its alliance with the United States is vital, providing military aid, diplomatic support, and strategic cover in international fora.⁶ Relations with Russia and China are more nuanced, reflecting Israel's balancing act between great powers. Nevertheless, Israel remains diplomatically isolated in the Middle East and absent from regional multilateral institutions.

Another strategic aim of Israel is maintaining its identity as a Jewish and democratic state. This objective intersects with its ap-



proach to the Palestinian Question, where Israel has pursued a long-standing policy of containment rather than resolution. Through military control over Gaza and the West Bank, economic sanctions, and strategic settlement expansion, Israel is suppressing Palestinian sovereignty and at the same time avoiding comprehensive negotiations.⁷ While this strategy ensures short-term stability, it also deepens regional hostility and damages Israel's international legitimacy.

Moreover, its economic power alone does not translate into regional dominance. While Israel is a technological powerhouse, its economy lacks the scale to rival the financial influence of Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These countries leverage their vast oil wealth and strategic investments to shape regional dynamics, exerting influence over trade, infrastructure, and financial networks. Israel, by contrast, has a highly developed, but relatively small economy, limiting its ability to project power beyond security and defense.

Although Israel possesses considerable defense capabilities and military might, its regional role is undermined by its limited soft power and lack of broad-based acceptance. Unlike regional actors such as Turkey or Saudi Arabia that maintain cultural, ideological, or religious appeal, Israel is still perceived as a threat by many of its neighbors, as evidenced by repeated condemnations from Lebanon and Syria, and by the persistent refusal from countries such as Algeria and Iraq to normalize diplomatic relations. Its isolation is reinforced by historical narratives, namely the “Masada complex”, which glorifies heroic resistance over compromise and integration.⁸ Finally, structural factors in Israel's domestic politics also limit its regional role. The country faces deep political instability, marked by recent successive elections, fragile coalitions, and widespread distrust in political institutions.⁹ This internal fragmentation creates a dissonance between Israel's external image and its domestic reality of unresolved societal divides. A state engulfed in internal crises is unlikely to generate the coherence needed for regional leadership. Yet, in the aftermath of the Gaza war, Israel has doubled down on displays of military resolve and diplomatic assertiveness, seemingly in an effort to compensate for its internal weaknesses and to reaffirm its regional relevance. High-profile retaliatory operations, intensified rhetoric against Iran and Hamas, and visible engagement with its allies suggest a deliberate attempt to project unity and control externally, while internal cohesion remains fragile.¹⁰

The Gaza war has significantly reshaped several key dimensions of Israel's regional and international standing. The momentum generated by the Abraham Accords has slowed significantly, as normalization efforts with Saudi Arabia have halted. Although economic ties with the UAE and Turkey technically persist, political relations have stalled and high-level diplomatic engagement has become more restrained. At the same time, Israel is under unprecedented international scrutiny. The genocide case, brought against it by South Africa at the ICJ and repeated condemnations from the UN Secretary General have undermined its legitimacy globally and weakened its diplomatic outreach. Regionally, the geographic expansion and escala-



tion of the conflict, with direct military engagement in Syria and Lebanon, has not only widened Israel's strategic exposure but also signals a shift towards prolonged multi-front containment rather than decisive resolution.

In an attempt to counteract the setbacks it has faced, Israel has intensified its outreach towards its Western allies, particularly the United States and the European Union, to garner political support and frame the conflict as part of a broader counterterrorism agenda. Despite its growing isolation, it has relied on economic resilience, sustaining foreign investment and defense exports, to project stability. Furthermore, Israel has launched diplomatic campaigns targeting international fora such as the ICJ and the UNHRC, seeking to discredit allegations of war crimes and reassert its narrative of defensive necessity. These strategies, while assertive, reflect a broader pattern of resistance to external pressure, signaling defiance in the face of international scrutiny — a continuation of the “Masada complex” on the global stage.

To conclude, while Israel is able to effectively block threats, neutralize adversaries, and defend its existence, it lacks the soft power, economic influence, and ideological appeal needed to shape the region. The Gaza conflict, rather than serving long-term strategic goals, further highlights Israel's reactive nature. As long as Israel remains focused on defensive survival rather than regional integration, it will continue to be a witness to regional developments, rather than the potential architect of a new Middle Eastern order.



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EGYPT

A RETURN TO REGIONAL PROMINENCE OR A SPIRAL INTO DECLINE?

Chryssa Toufexi

Once a leading power in the Arab world, Egypt's influence has declined following the Arab Spring revolution, a severe economic crisis and shifting regional dynamics in the Middle East. Whereas Egypt envisages a return to regional prominence through its traditional role in peace diplomacy, its foreign policy is tied to the wider regional competition between the Saudi-led Suni block and its containment of the growing influence of non-Arab nations, Turkey and Iran.

IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY, under Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–1970), Egypt held a hegemonic role and exerted considerable influence in Middle Eastern affairs. Nasser's championing of Pan-Arab nationalism significantly enhanced Egypt's standing. His support for anti-colonial movements in the global South, backing Algeria's war against France, his anti-imperialist stance, notably opposing the Baghdad Pact and nationalizing the Suez Canal, and his central role in the Six-Day War (1967) and the War of Attrition (1969-1970), all solidified Egypt's leadership in the Arab world. Anwar Sadat (1970-1981) shifted Cairo's strategy, switched alliances from the Soviet Union to the US and signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, leading Egypt to a decade-long suspension from the Arab League.

Mubarak (1981-2011) continued his predecessor's foreign policy of maintaining regional peace and his close US alliance, receiving billions in aid for his role in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Regionally, he joined forces with Saudi Arabia and Iran, and rejoined the Arab League. His participation in the US-led Allied Coalition in the 1991 Gulf War was instrumental in convincing other Arab states to join and in enhancing Egypt's regional and international standing.¹ Domestically, however, Mubarak faced an economic crisis, corruption and unrest, which he met with repression. By the late 1980s, Egypt faced an economic crisis, due to the collapse of global oil prices rendering its rentier model unsustainable. Persistent deficit, debt and inflation, led in the 1990s to an IMF liberalization program.² Ultimately, his 30-year iron fist rule ended with the 2011 uprising.

The social and economic grievances that ignited the 2011 Arab Spring revolution, followed by Morsi's brief Muslim Brotherhood (MB) presidency (2012-2013), gradually eroded Cairo's strategic influence. Amidst domestic upheaval, the Middle East balance of power shifted with the rise of Turkey and Iran. The post-Arab Spring security environment became volatile due to civil wars in Syria (2011-present), Libya (2014-2020), and Yemen (2014-present), proxy arenas for Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Egypt is currently facing its worst economic crisis in decades, with trade deficits, rising interest rates, currency shortages and debt, severely impacting Egyptian households, with a third of the population living below the poverty line.³ Underlying issues include a lack of reforms, crony capitalism and borrowing. Regional conflict exacerbates economic woes. The Red Sea crisis slashed an estimated \$7 billion in revenue.⁴ The Ukraine war drove up wheat costs, fuelled inflation and caused a 14% currency devaluation.⁵

Egypt's economic and regime viability rely on foreign aid. The IMF provided \$12 billion in 2016, followed by a \$3 billion package in 2022, which was expanded to \$8 billion in 2024. Gulf states bailed out Egypt three times, in 2013, 2016 and 2022.⁶ In 2022 Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar pledged \$22 billion.⁷ In 2024, the UAE agreed to invest \$35 billion to develop Egypt's Mediterranean coast.⁸

However, Cairo's economic dependence significantly constrains independent foreign policy. Since Sisi's presidency (2013-), Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE became close allies, with Gulf aid helping consolidate the regime. The three share a stance against violent Islamists, the MB and its allies Qatar and Turkey and support a Saudi-led Sunni bloc against Shia Iran and Hezbollah. Relations with Qatar and Turkey, historically supporting the MB, deteriorated after Morsi's ouster. Turkey refused to recognize Sisi's presidency, whereas Egypt joined the 2017 Qatar blockade, illustrating its Gulf allegiance.⁹ The Qatar blockade and backing of opposing sides



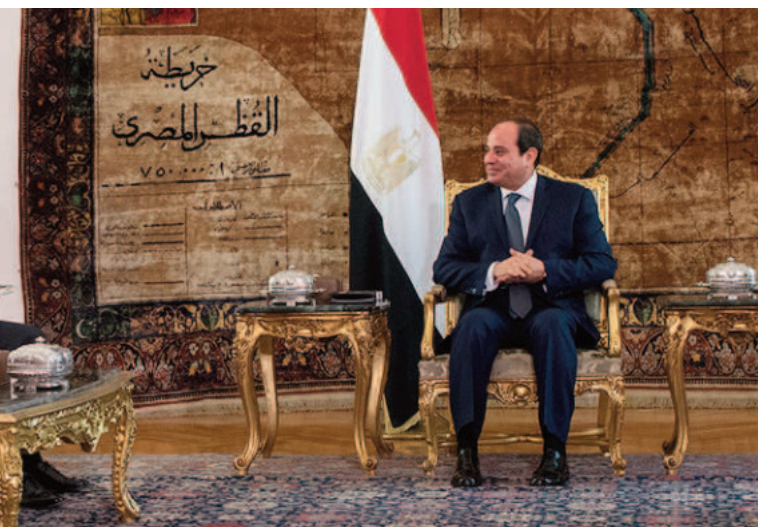
in Libya worsened Turkish-Egyptian relations. Relations improved and diplomacy was restored only in 2023, followed by mutual agreements in an effort to boost foreign investment in Egypt.

Egypt has not regained dominance, often being the junior partner to Saudi Arabia. While Egypt prioritizes regional mediation in Libya, between Palestinian factions and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Saudi anti-Iran strategy often sidelines its interests.¹⁰ Libya further illustrates these constraints. Concerned about instability, terrorism and weapons smuggling, Egypt, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, supported Haftar against the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, supported by Turkey and Qatar. Egypt's Haftar bet was a miscalculation; after his Tripoli offensive failed, Egypt shifted strategy, restoring GNA ties and distancing itself from the Emirati approach, which compromised its neutrality and undermined its mediation efforts.¹¹

Nonetheless, Cairo remains a key mediator between Hamas, Israel and other Palestinian factions. Since the 1979 peace deal with Israel Egypt has been the main mediator in the Middle East peace process and gained leverage with the US and Europe as Israel's most important Arab interlocutor. However, the 2020 Abraham Accords, and the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab monarchies, the UAE and Bahrain, have rendered Egypt a junior partner in peace diplomacy, shifting influence towards the Gulf.¹² The UAE seeks a central regional security role, demonstrating its reliability to Washington. While ties with Egypt and Jordan have strained, the UAE hasn't downgraded relations with Israel, maintaining its ambassador in Tel Aviv during the war in Gaza. Qatar, with strong ties to Hamas, has become the primary mediator between Hamas and Israel, often sidestepping Egypt.

Egypt's ambition to lead the Arab world is constrained by its economic dependence on Gulf countries, limiting its independent foreign policy and leadership capacity. Its hegemonic aspirations linked to mediating the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are increasingly challenged by Gulf states. Nonetheless, amidst regional conflicts, Egypt remains pivotal, being aware that its national security depends on regional stability. Egypt should continue its close strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar while improving ties with Turkey and Iran notwithstanding their differences. Cairo will need to balance between preserving its peace treaty with Israel and helping maintain territorial integrity for the Palestinian Territories, preventing the occupation of Gaza or the displacement of its population. By nurturing its multiple strategic and economic partnerships regionally and internationally and maintaining its longstanding

vision and role in the stability of the Middle East, Egypt can once again assume its prominent position among Arab states.



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Entangling Foreign Aid with Military Assertiveness:

Is the
UAE
Transforming
from an
Influential
Regional
Actor
to a
Global
Power?

Eirini Giannopoulou

This article aims to portray the bigger picture behind the UAE's foreign policy priorities, seeking to expose linkages between foreign aid and its securitisation. It further paints the new MENA diplomatic backdrop via the UAE's perspective and its power projection aspirations through commerce. In 1971, the establishment of the UAE and the launching of the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) were almost simultaneous. The Emirates have transferred more than \$98 billion in foreign aid to this day. After the Arab Spring, the UAE turned the page on its once non-interventionist and mainly humanitarian foreign policy, focusing more on securitisation, international influence and the strengthening of diplomatic ties, within both the increasingly turbulent MENA region, as well as a fragmented international system.¹

Diplomatic initiatives: new partnerships and normalisation attempts

WHILE UPHOLDING ITS STANCE regarding the integrity of the Arab world, the UAE has a “burden-sharing” concern, remaining focused on its goal of “ensuring stability and prosperity”.² As a key US ally, one of the most important pillars of the UAE’s foreign policy is the containment of Iran and its Shi’a proxies in northern Iraq and South Yemen, which could potentially jeopardise economic interests. Still, it is crucial for the UAE to balance relations with Iran, as it is one of its largest economic partners. Normalisation of relations with Israel, after the 2020 Abraham Accords, was a breakthrough, even though economic ties between the UAE and Israeli companies had already begun two decades ago. The deal sought to prevent tensions in the region and, therefore, develop further economic activity.³ Similarly, there have been attempts for dialogue with Qatar and Turkey -with positive developments still uncertain- given the different geopolitical goals, such as maritime control.

Foreign aid: protecting global trade routes through external assistance

The Emirates are a leading global donor, surpassing most OECD countries. Yemen has been the biggest aid recipient of UAE aid since 2021, having received more than \$6 billion in humanitarian assistance since 2015. In a strategic region such as the Red Sea, humanitarian assistance is closely linked to security considerations, the halting of Islamist radical groups and the protection of trade routes.⁴ The Emiratis’ pursuit of the Port of Aden, aiming to disrupt Houthi activity hostile to their commercial interests and to protect maritime borders, has met with significant backlash, perceived as a move that severely undermines Yemen’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁵ The UAE has been actively trying to become a leading actor among trade hubs linking Africa and Asia, overlooking competition between emerging powers, such as Turkey, Russia, China and Saudi Arabia.

Through this “*commercialisation of humanitarianism*” tactic, the UAE navigates an increasingly multipolar world. The main difference between Emirati and Western aid is that the former is not accompanied by conditionalities and is centered around South-South collaboration.⁶ It is crucial at this point to recall that aid allocation is political. Lack of transparency regarding distribution priorities, as well as details about domestic donors, has increased scepticism around deeper geopolitical motives behind Emirati foreign aid.

Securing economic prosperity through regional interventionism

The cautiousness through which the UAE sees its neighbours has three main drivers: regional security, domestic coherence and economic prosperity.⁷ A characteristic example of this strategy is the UAE’s involvement in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood is perceived as a major threat to Emirati societal pillars, with the UAE actively trying to contain Islamist political movements that could challenge its domestic balance, regional influence and overall sta-



bility-to-investment ratio. Confirming this securitisation of development, Egypt received over \$4 billion in UAE aid during peak-2013.

Concerned by the spill-over influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sudan also became a priority for the UAE. Access to fertile land and coastline was a big factor for Emirati interference in Sudanese domestic affairs and the establishment of a solid presence in the Horn of Africa. It became imperative to tackle political Islam in Sudan, as well as neighbouring Somalia, to protect international commerce.⁸ To do so, the UAE transferred budgets to the Sudanese economy, with the condition that Islamists would be excluded from the government. The UAE has injected approximately \$4 billion in aid for Sudan. Simultaneously, the UAE has been involved in one of the world's most devastating humanitarian crises, currently backing the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and being complicit in genocide.⁹ There is evidence to suggest that the UAE, in order to establish its influence in Sudan, has used mercenaries and Libya's Haftar forces.¹⁰ The UAE is also attempting to curb democratic movements that could put its regional influence at risk, exposing authoritarian tactics, dependency relations and pushing for alternative economic and political alliances. Finally, it has allegedly supported fighters from both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and RSF to remain involved in the Yemeni conflict and pursue its economic objectives in the Gulf of Aden. To do so, it has utilized networks expanding from Libya to Uganda, to transfer weapons to the RSF and smuggle gold. The UAE has denied these allegations.

In conclusion, the UAE is a small, yet influential state aiming to project its economic and military power beyond its regional borders. By becoming more interventionist and engaged after the Arab uprisings, it seeks to shield its momentum and become a respected competitor within multilateralism, being increasingly active in Sub-Saharan Africa trade patterns and conflict management processes.¹¹ By establishing itself as a reliable partner that can offer security, development and economic growth it positions itself in competition with other powerful actors seeking to extract resources from the African continent, the Arab peninsula and beyond. Finally, the UAE paradigm is useful for understanding the dialectics between economic interests, foreign aid, the military-industrial complex, and the transparency and accountability inconsistencies that stem from them.



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SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY

IN TRANSITION

FROM COUNTERREVOLUTION TO REGIONAL STABILIZATION AND STRATEGIC GLOBAL REBRANDING



Ilias Mitrousis

During the past twenty-five years, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has evolved from diplomatically balancing powerful adversaries and spearheading regional counter-revolutionary interventions to advocating for regional stability. This article traces the trajectory of the Kingdom's regional strategy and the drivers behind its evolving geopolitical posture. It argues that while tactically adaptive, Saudi foreign policy remains strategically anchored in the imperative to preserve monarchical legitimacy amid shifting regional dynamics and an increasingly multipolar international order.

THE AL-SAUD DYNASTY'S INTERTWINEMENT WITH THE STATE has historically shaped Saudi foreign policy around the key imperative to preserve the monarchy's legitimacy. Absent both a unifying nationalist political ideology and substantial military power, Riyadh adopted a dual strategic approach to counter perceived threats from powerful adversaries: politically leveraging its Wahhabi religious ideology, while building alliances and capitalising on its oil wealth. This approach manifested in numerous cases: Riyadh countered Nasser's Pan-Arabism by promoting international Islamic institutions, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and forging closer ties to the US under the Nixon Doctrine; aligned with pre-revolutionary Iran against Ba'athist Iraq's secular republicanism; and later pivoted to support Saddam Hussein in the Iraq-Iran War after assessing that Iran's Shi'a theocratic republicanism posed an existential challenge to the Gulf's model of Islamic monarchy. The 1981 establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) epitomized Riyadh's alliance-building approach by institutionalizing monarchical solidarity in the peninsula, and facilitated the anchoring of Saudi security within the strategic partnership with the US, following the latter's military entrenchment in the area after the Gulf War.¹

The disruption in the regional balance of power caused by the 2003 US invasion of Iraq put the Saudi reactionary balancing approach into question. Despite Tehran's toned-down revolutionary rhetoric during the 1990s, which contributed to a brief thaw with Riyadh, the former's expanding influence in post-Saddam Iraq, increased nuclear activity, and growing ties with Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis increased Saudi insecurity. Concurrently, surging oil revenues strengthened the Kingdom's economy and military, and the GCC's growing imprint in global financial markets expanded its international influence.² Riyadh's strategic self-confidence mounted throughout the 2010s with no revolutionary movement ideologically threatening the monarchy - up until the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The 2011 Arab uprisings triggered a strategic shift in Saudi regional foreign policy not only because of the threatening dynamics of revolutionary Islamist groups, but also due to its declining trust in its alliance with the US. Obama's call for Mubarak —a US-loyal ally— to resign reportedly outraged Riyadh, as did the decision to avoid intervening in Syria.³ Consequently, Saudi policy became more assertive and interventionist, suppressing ideological adversaries in its near-abroad. The same year, the Saudi army led a GCC military intervention in Bahrain, suppressing the popular uprising that threatened the local monarchy.⁴ By the same token, it actively supported Egyptian General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's 2013 military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood's democratically elected government.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy grew more assertive following King Salman's 2015 accession and the 2017 appointment of his son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), as Crown Prince. MBS spearheaded the 2015 military intervention in Yemen against the Houthis to counter Iranian influence, and in 2017, Riyadh —by then under his de facto leadership— joined the UAE-led blockade of Qatar to curb its perceived Islamist-friendly foreign policy. Both campaigns, along with the 2017 detention of Lebanese PM Hariri in Riyadh, and the 2018 Khashoggi assassination, culminated in costly ventures and damaged the Kingdom's international standing.⁵ Meanwhile, Riyadh perceived the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) as a sign of US disengagement. That perception was reinforced by Trump's



unforceful response to the 2019 Houthi attacks on Aramco facilities that halved the daily production of oil. These cumulative setbacks exposed the limits of Saudi coercion, likely prompting a policy reassessment.

Riyadh's current strategic reorientation toward de-escalation follows MBS's Vision 2030, a national development plan aimed at diversifying the economy, reducing oil dependence, and transforming Saudi Arabia into an investment and cultural hub, hence securing its post-oil future.⁶ Thus, Saudi Arabia pursued stability by easing the Qatar blockade in 2022 and de-escalating in Yemen in the same year.

Domestically, Saudi society's modernization under Vision 2030 has manifested through selective reforms, including allowing women to drive and live independently while curtailing the powers of the religious police. The government invests significantly in entertainment and sports, generating high visibility domestically, while simultaneously functioning as a public relations instrument for the state on the international stage, as demonstrated by the Saudi Pro League's international broadcasting deals. These social changes deviate from the traditional religious conservatism governing Saudi life and are complemented by pledges for educational reform and the expansion of private-sector job opportunities, thus appealing to the young population, 60% of which is under 30 years old. Collectively, these developments illustrate that Riyadh leads a top-down process of cultivating a new Saudi nationalism by tying national pride to economic and social progress rather than religious identity alone.⁷

Regionally, under the new stability-oriented foreign policy, Riyadh restored relations with Qatar, Turkey, and Syria. Although the monarchy hesitates to invest in the Levant, it recently agreed to settle Syria's World Bank debt with Qatar jointly.⁸ This decision could indicate reluctant trust in Turkey and Qatar to more actively monitor the country's new Islamist government, while establishing a stronger foothold to counterbalance their regional influence. Above all, the 2023 Chinese-mediated normalization agreement with Iran represents a key component of the monarchy's revised direction. Although most fundamental differences remain unresolved, both sides have upheld the *détente*. The sharp drop in Saudi-Houthi hostilities and Riyadh's caution not to get involved in any Israeli operation against Tehran are indicative. Moreover, the unchecked trajectory of Israel's war on Gaza and its subsequently destabilizing effects could paradoxically precipitate pragmatic alignment between Riyadh and Tehran, as evidenced by the freeze in talks on a Saudi-Israeli normalization.⁹

Outside the region, Saudi Arabia strengthens its major international partnerships with Russia, with whom it coordinates the global



oil production in OPEC+, and China, its largest trade partner. The Kingdom's place as the world's second-largest oil producer provides considerable leeway in navigating its primarily transactional relations with these countries, without overstraining its ties with the US. Besides, no other country matches the depth of US-Saudi security cooperation—encompassing intelligence sharing, military training, and privileged access to arms deals—which has



steadily grown since 2003, when Riyadh began considering al-Qaeda a serious threat following its first attacks on Saudi soil. Recently, the Kingdom has adopted a diplomatic stance of "positive neutrality". It avoids deeper alignments in major conflicts, as evidenced by its functional relations with Ukraine while consistently refraining from imposing sanctions on Russia. Capitalizing on its capacity to preserve communication channels with most parties open, Riyadh presents an ever-growing engagement with mediation initiatives—from Sudan's civil war to the US-Russia negotiations on Ukraine or prisoner exchanges.¹⁰ This trajectory, albeit still at a very nascent stage, seems to follow in the footsteps of Qatar and Oman. If Saudi Arabia emerges as a competent mediator in the future, it could benefit its ability to withstand future political pressures.

The evolution of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy can be traced to changes in the regional balance of power, but more fundamentally to the monarchy's enduring priority of preserving its legitimacy. Whether through leveraging religious conservatism and forging alliances, conducting military or economic interventionism, or, more recently, cultivating a new Saudi nationalism and a stability-oriented diplomacy for the Kingdom's global rebranding, each of these phases reflects the monarchy's need to safeguard regime security in a bipolar, unipolar, or multipolar world.



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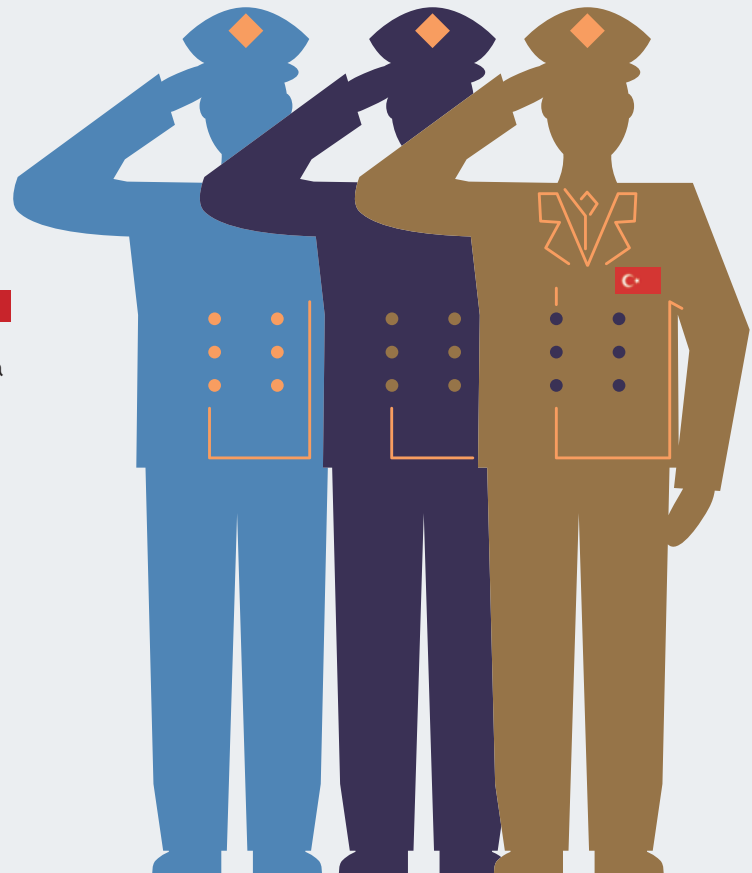


TURKEY

A NEW MILITARY-DRIVEN FOREIGN POLICY

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

Over the two decades of AKP rule, Turkey has been transformed from a strictly secular state to a model Muslim nation with a secular government and liberal economy, into a hard power with growing authoritarian tendencies. By intervening in other countries' internal politics and venturing outside its territory to protect its security interests, offering military aid, training and exporting Turkish-manufactured weapons, Turkey is considered among the most valuable players in the Middle East. However, in the post October 7 world, Turkey falls under the risk of endangering its political stability and economic credibility, balancing between Islam, nationalism and expanding trade relations.



Ever since the formation of the Turkish Republic, Turkey has been presenting itself as a successful model of a secular and modern nation-state in the Middle East. However, since the early 2000s and the rise of the AKP, Turkey has been successful at boosting its image as a modern, Muslim state, with a booming liberal economy. Turkish products, television, schools as well as development aid, all promote the image of a modern Muslim state, along with boosting Turkey's economic growth to old and new markets.¹ Hence, the "Turkish Model" in the public discourse stands for a combination of a religiously conservative governing party and secular governance, representing the most successful combination of Islam and democracy, and an alternative to radical Islamism.

In terms of foreign policy, Turkey has become more involved in other countries' domestic affairs since 2011. By assuming the role of the "protector", it supported its "brothers and sisters" against oppressive regimes during and in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. In other words, it was a significant evolution in Turkish foreign policy. For example, Turkey's support to the Syrian resistance gradually evolved into military involvement, starting with assistance for the Free Syrian Army in 2011, then taking part in border clashes in 2012, and lastly engaging in direct military interventions. By openly supporting the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral victory, and offering asylum to 1,500 members of the Egyptian branch following the 2013 coup d'état, Turkey's relations with Egypt were strained significantly; its deep involvement in Libya, which eventually turned into military aid and diplomatic support for the UN-recognized government, might also be perceived as a proxy war between Turkey and Egypt.² In addition, Turkey's support for the Palestinians, its criticism of Israeli policies and stressed diplomatic relationship with Israel since Operation Cast Lead of 2008, and especially since the Gaza Flotilla raid in 2010, bolstered its popularity and prestige in the Arab World.

There seems to be little doubt that the AKP leadership perceives Turkey as a "natural" leader of the region, something that Western observers have characterized as "neo-Ottomanism", even though the term has been rejected by members of the government, including former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu.³ Through the discourse regarding common Islamic values, Erdogan has managed to portray himself as a modern-day leader of the global Islamic "ummah". This attitude was further exacerbated by improving relations between Turkey and other Muslim countries, or by establishing closer ties with organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

While Turkey's foreign policy heavily relies on the Islamic narrative, it transcends Middle Eastern borders, with development aid and military assistance to the Turkic countries of Central Asia or to Muslim-majority African countries; Ankara has been training Azeri officials and even supplied Azerbaijan with combat drones and other military equipment in the 2020 Karabakh war, and recently mediated a deal between Somalia and Ethiopia over territorial disputes.⁴ This has brought about a new dynamic to the Islamic world, as it offers an alternative to the Saudi narrative of being the leader of the Sunni world and protector against Iran and Shi'a influence.

What is more, Turkey has been slowly but steadily drifting away from the US-led Western-dominated discourse. NATO's inactivity over the airspace violations by Russia along the Turkey-Syria border in 2015, and the US cooperation with the PYD in the fight against ISIS, convinced some Turkish officials that overreliance on foreign partners undermined their own national and security interests, especially as the risk of cross-border terrorism from Syria and Iraq increased significantly.⁵ Moreover, due to electoral



changes in 2018 and AKP's alliance of necessity with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), AKP needed to tone down the Islamic message, and adopt more authoritarian and explicitly nationalist policies.⁶ Therefore, Turkey seems no longer portrayed as a supporter of the people against oppressive regimes, especially after pursuing aggressive policies in Syria and Libya, but as an important military regional power.

These developments forced Turkey to turn away from its sophisticated exertion of soft power that was cultivated during the early 2000s, and invest in its military apparatus, displaying its land, sea, and air strength. It is of note that before the AKP's rule, Turkey had primarily a security-related, military foreign policy, whereas it is now venturing outside its borders. Following the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, the Turkish Armed Forces were drastically rebuilt but were soon afterwards able to conduct numerous successful cross-country operations. The military operations in Syria established a Turkish-controlled safe zone in the North, to counter Kurdish insurgents, terrorist groups, and the encroachment of the Assad regime. As a result, they altered the conflict's geography by reducing Turkey's perceived threats, by carving out a Turkish-controlled zone named "Euphrates Shield" to push away armed YPG units and jihadist groups from operating near its borders.⁷ Moreover, Turkey has also signed multiple defense agreements with Somalia, Sudan, and Libya, and established military bases in the Middle East, the Gulf, and the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, it has managed to establish itself as a notable weapons exporter since it switched to domestic production. With about 3,000 weapons companies operating, Turkey's defense exports totaled \$7.1 billion in 2024, reaching 180 countries.⁸ All the above demonstrate that Turkey is using its hard power to project a message of self-reliance and credibility.

In the wake of October 7 and in view of Western support for Israel, Turkey is trying to internationalize the conflict, attempting to rally other countries to take a stand and designate Israeli settlers as terrorists.⁹ Despite maintaining a turbulent diplomatic relationship with Israel, their trade was never in question; however, for the first time, Turkey has suspended trade with Israel, a sign of protest against the situation in Gaza and a reflection of redrawn electoral priorities. Turkey has also been careful not to overshadow other regional players, such as the Gulf monarchies, but has sought to align with them over issues regarding the future of Syria and the resolution of the situation in Gaza.¹⁰ What is more, Turkey has been taking active steps to normalize its relations with authoritarian regimes in the region; Turkish officials visited Egypt in 2023-the first official visit since Sisi became president- followed by talks over selling military equipment. Turkey is also trying to curb the Muslim Brotherhood's influence domestically, for example by revoking the Turkish citizenship of its leader in Istanbul.¹¹ In addition, it is steadily moving towards further rapprochement with the GCC countries, working on diplomatic as well as trade relations.

As Turkey gradually turned away from its ideologically-driven foreign policy, which supported Political Islam at all costs, it had



to rely on its hard power and its ability to manufacture its own arms and weapon systems in order to secure its borders. This prompted Turkey to reconsider its severed or damaged relations with other important regional players, which are needed in order to restore stability in the region, but also promote the military expertise Turkey developed by bridging to new markets. Yet, the anti-Western rhetoric, combined with illiberal policies, such as the imprisonment of journalists, politicians, academics, artists, and other public figures, or the restrictions on freedom of speech by controlling traditional media and restricting access to social media, have limited both the country's soft power and attractiveness internationally, and people's trust domestically. This prolonged political instability is manifested in the recent protests against the arrest of Istanbul's mayor Ekrem Imamoglu. And, despite its booming economy and military capabilities, Turkey is very much dependent on international trade and its social capital, both of which can be harmed by an authoritarian regime.¹² It remains to be seen how Turkey will manage to navigate between the West, Islam, and nationalism in order to retain its position as a regional power, while keeping the country politically stable.



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Transition into a 'New Syria' under Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

VISIONS, DISCOURSE AND REALITY



Katia Zagoritou

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a turning point in Syria's history, heralding a new era for the war-torn country. What might this 'new Syria' look? Given HTS's ideology – despite its transformation and the extent thereof – is Syria about to transform into an Islamist hub attracting Islamist movements and/or serving as a role model in the region? Furthermore, within a changing Middle East, could Syria regain its 1970s-1980s status as a major regional actor? While it is too early to offer any predictions, since developments are constantly unfolding, this article will attempt to cautiously approach these timely questions.

THE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA, which led to the overthrow of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, are viewed by scholars such as Asef Bayat as part of the Arab Spring, albeit in a complex way. Bayat refers to them as a “delayed revolution” while cautiously suggesting that we may be “on the brink of a third wave” of the Arab Spring, especially if renewed protests emerge in countries such as Iraq, Tunisia or Iran.¹ At the same time, some analysts highlight striking similarities between Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s (HTS) rapid and seemingly effortless takeover of Syria and the Taliban’s seizure of power in August 2021: their adoption of a conciliatory approach seeking international recognition, a nationalistic shift, willingness to assist the US in the fight against ISIS, and the speed of their victory.²

Considering the aforementioned similarities and HTS’s Salafi-jihadist ideological background, questions have been raised about the nature of the “new Syria”, particularly whether Syria is on the verge of transforming into an Islamist hub and a model for Islamists in the region. Let us recall that HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, first split from ISIS in 2013 and from al-Qaeda in July 2016. HTS has verbally emphasized its shift from jihadism to Syrian Islamism and its transformation into a more moderate, inclusive, and local-based movement.³ However, developments on the ground tell a different story. Indeed, ominous signs have begun to appear, the most alarming being the massacres of Alawites and Druzes, in March and late April 2025, which resulted in the deaths of 1,562 and 134 individuals, respectively. Moreover, equally worrying is the inclusion of jihadists in the transitional government and the new Syrian army – the latter also includes foreign fighters.⁴

Examining HTS’s recent discourse can offer insights into how the group has sought to portray itself. By 2017, its leadership began blending Islamism with a local and nationalist focus on Syria.⁵ Between 2017 and December 2024, HTS promoted the concept of al-Kayan al-Sunni (the Sunni entity), positioning itself as the protector of Sunnis against the Assad regime. However, during its December 2024 offensive, its discourse shifted markedly towards more inclusive rhetoric, as reflected in its new slogan “Syria for all Syrians”.⁶ Al-Shara’a has been deeply invested in the idea of creating a Sunni entity; in a July 2022 televised meeting, he stated: ‘the revolution’s goal was no longer just to end tyranny but to create a Sunni entity’. Yet, in order to avoid the term al-Kayan al-Sunni, imbued with politically charged connotations for the multiconfessional and multiethnic Syria, al-Shara’a opted for the concept of ‘Umayyadism’; a concept invoking the legacy of the Umayyad dynasty which ruled the first Islamic empire with Damascus as its imperial capital (661-750 CE).⁷ Considering that his circle frequently refers to the Umayyad model, some pundits speak of ‘Neo-Umayyadism’. Still, the concept carries its own symbolisms: while pragmatist, worldly, and generally tolerant towards Christians and Jews, the Umayyad dynasty was historically hostile to Shia and Persia.⁸

At any rate, HTS’s version of ‘Syrian Islamism’ coupled with a high degree of (tactical) pragmatism and a more moderate – at least rhetorically – public profile, has contributed to its success and may serve as a model for other Islamist movements. Indeed, notwithstanding their ideological differences and sectarian divides, Islamist organizations and parties across the world - such as many branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, and Hamas, to name but a few - congratulated HTS on its victory in Syria. The first recognition of HTS as Syria’s new government by a head of any state came from Afghanistan’s Taliban,



who publicly congratulated HTS by name as early as December 8, 2024. Although al-Qaeda Central or its branches have not released official statements, supportive comments were voiced by its affiliates, such as Abdelhaq al-Turkistani, leader of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, Mauritanian Islamic Forum's president and one of Bin Laden's top advisers. Criticism of HTS – unsurprisingly – came from the Islamic State accusing it of betrayal of the jihadi cause and collaboration with the enemies of Muslims. This universal support for HTS suggests that the group's fusion of nationalism and Islamism could act as an example and a governance model for other Islamists.⁹ Overall, as a former Islamist leader puts it, HTS's takeover in Syria is regarded as 'an opportunity for new Islamists to organize differently from traditional groups'.¹⁰

Regardless of how other Islamist movements view al-Shara'a's attempts to govern Syria, examining with whom they engage at the international level is essential to understanding their strategy. In fact, al-Shara'a began cultivating foreign relations as early as 2017, with Turkey, the UN and various NGOs present in Idlib; this provides evidence of his willingness to engage with the international community. Since HTS seized power, this engagement has been formalized and intensified through official visits by al-Shara'a and Syria's Foreign Minister, Assad al-Shaibani, to various countries, as well as meetings with foreign ministers and international organizations in Damascus. Concerning the former, the most significant events include al-Sharaa's trip to France in early May and his meeting with US President Donald Trump on May 14, 2025, in Riyadh, which resulted in Trump's announcement of the lifting of US sanctions on Syria. As for the latter, FMs and diplomatic delegations from the US, Europe, Gulf states, Turkey, Russia, and China—to name a few—have visited al-Shara'a in Damascus since December 2024. Surprisingly, South Korean FM Cho Tae-yul met with al-Shaibani in Damascus and established diplomatic relations between the two states in early April - a move that contrasts with Bashar al-Assad's former ties with North Korea. Lastly, meetings have also been held in Damascus with international organizations, such as the United Nations Human Rights Office, the EU, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and Amnesty International.

This brings us to the article's second question: could Syria, under al-Shara'a, aspire to and even regain its past status as a major regional actor, especially as it was during the 1970s-1980s under Hafiz al-Asad? The focus herein will be on two aspects, foreign policy and economy. First, Syria's alliances are considerably shifting, reflecting a radically different environment from that of Hafiz

al-Asad's period. A major difference concerns the rupture with Syria's ally Iran and non-state allies such as Hezbollah. However, for the time being, there has been no similar break with Russia, Syria's historical ally, due to mutual interests. Moreover, new alliances are being formed, mainly driven by Syria's dire socio-economic situation and aimed at lifting or easing sanctions, as well as securing economic and financial aid. Thus, apart from the relationship with Turkey, which has



been pivotal in both Idlib's administration and Syria's takeover in December 2024, al-Shara'a primarily seeks a rapprochement with the Gulf States—Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar—with his first official foreign trip being in Saudi Arabia in February 2025 – and aims to forge relationships with the US and Europe.

Second, given the huge destruction and the dire socio-economic state of a deeply divided Syria, al-Sharaa's top priority currently is the country's reconstruction. These conditions undoubtedly compel him to show a willingness to accept any condition, provided that sanctions are eased, if not lifted, and financial aid begins to flow. Al-Sharaa's stance vis-à-vis Israel is telling in this regard: despite Israel's expanded occupation of Syrian territory and increased aggression, including the doubling of settlers in the Golan Heights since December 2024, al-Shara'a—who, ironically, hails from the Golan—has stated that he is open to normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel. At the same time, a considerable shift in Syria's historical support for the Palestinian cause is underway; the detention of two senior members of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the arrest of the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP-GC), Tajal Naji in Damascus, in April and May 2025 respectively, reflect this change.¹¹ Therefore, considering the dire economic circumstances and the concessions that al-Shara'a is forced to make, with doubtful results, it seems that regaining a regional status akin to that of the 1970s-1980s is not only highly unlikely in the foreseeable future, but also not currently prioritized.

To conclude, given its success in toppling the Asad regime and seizing power, the model promoted by HTS might serve as an example for other Islamist movements. However, the future of HTS governance remains highly uncertain, mainly due to serious socio-economic and security challenges, as well as internal divisions. That being said, a revival of Syria's status as a major regional actor, as it was in the 1970s-1980s, appears unlikely. Last but not least, al-Shara'a's conception of power seems highly personal; he appears more focused on consolidating his own authority by any means. This constitutes an ominous sign for the Syrian people who have long aspired to see their country escape authoritarianism.¹²



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OMAN AMIDST REGIONAL CRISIS



Panagiota Bouka

The Sultanate of Oman has long maintained an independent course in its foreign policy, frequently diverging from the dominant currents in the Gulf region. As new dynamics reshape the political landscape of the area, particularly in the aftermath of the conflicts in Syria and Gaza, Oman's role merits its own examination. This article seeks to assess Oman's current foreign policy orientation by exploring its historical diplomatic stance, its evolving position within the Gulf, and the strategic interests that guide its engagement in the region.

Under the leadership of former Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Oman developed a foreign policy rooted in "positive neutrality," balancing regional engagement with an openness toward major global powers, especially the United States. His successor, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, sought to maintain this legacy of diplomatic neutrality. However, recent economic challenges and growing reliance on Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mechanisms have led Oman into closer alignment with Saudi Arabia—a development that potentially undermines Muscat's traditional neutrality on sensitive issues like the Iran nuclear deal, the Yemen war, and normalization efforts between Arab nations and Israel. Oman's economic vulnerability and dependence on GCC structures, where Saudi Arabia wields considerable influence, increasingly seem to shape its foreign policy posture.¹

Despite this shift, Oman has leveraged its dual membership in the GCC and its longstanding ties with Iran to offer a neutral platform for dialogue. This was evident in the early stages of the Saudi-Iranian détente, with Oman quietly supporting discussions that began in Baghdad in April 2021 amid heightened regional tensions.² Oman's discreet diplomatic style, preferring quiet engagement over public declarations, has consistently produced meaningful results, underscoring its value as a trusted actor. Accordingly, beyond Saudi-Iranian relations, Oman has also worked to repair Iran's strained relations with other Arab states—most notably Bahrain, which cut ties with Tehran in 2016, and Egypt, which severed relations following the Iranian Revolution in 1980. This reflects Oman's policy wherein Gulf security requires Arab-Iranian dialogue and cooperation, and that Arab alliances and sub-regional institutions should not be, by design, hostile to Tehran. This approach is consistent with Oman's historical stance, as evidenced when it refrained from severing ties with Cairo after the 1978 Camp David Accords—an action that distinguished Muscat from most Arab League members.³

By the same token, Oman also played a pivotal role in bridging communication between Iran and the United States since the early 2010s when it hosted the secret talks that eventually led to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁴ Muscat continues to serve as a discreet venue for dialogue between Tehran and Washington, valued for its geographic closeness to Iran and its low-profile diplomacy, which appeals to Tehran. At the same time, Oman's role also serves a domestic political purpose by signaling a degree of independence from Western—especially European—pressure regarding Iran's missile program, regional activities, and sanctions, all while simultaneously managing its permitted trade ties with Iran under international sanctions frameworks.⁵ More recently, following October 7, Oman positioned itself as a key advocate for including Hamas in official dialogue efforts. In the months following the escalation and Israel's military actions in Gaza, Oman engaged in high-level talks with Iran, advocated for a ceasefire in Gaza and emphasized the necessity of dialogue with Hamas—despite Hamas being designated a terrorist organization by the US and the EU.⁶ On February 16, 2024, Oman's Foreign Minister, Badr bin Hamad Albusaidi, emphasized the need for an emergency international conference on Palestinian statehood. He acknowledged that while the October 7 attack by Hamas was indefensible, for peace to be achieved it would be essential for peacemakers to engage in dialogue with Hamas and listen to their concerns.⁷ This approach aligns with Oman's long-standing foreign policy of maintaining diplomatic relations—even with controversial entities. More specifically, in Yemen, Oman has stressed the importance of including all factions, such as the Houthis, in direct talks.⁸



In the current crisis, as the Houthis launched attacks on vessels allegedly linked to Israel in the Red Sea, Oman worked diligently to ease tensions. Its efforts attracted the attention of British Foreign Secretary David Cameron, who visited Muscat for security talks. Oman's official position directly links the violence in Gaza to the instability in the Red Sea, emphasizing that peace in Palestine is essential to regional stability. While Oman's exports primarily target Asian markets, the broader disruption of global supply chains could inevitably impact the Sultanate's economy, making resolution of the crisis even more critical for Muscat.⁹

Moreover, Oman seems to align itself with the broader Arab consensus on the Israel-Palestine conflict, consistently supporting a two-state solution rooted in international law, while it refused to normalize relations with Israel unless it complied with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which called for the creation of an independent Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders.¹⁰ It has long backed the Palestinian right to self-determination, statehood, and dignity, while maintaining informal ties with Israel earlier than many GCC states, such as the UAE and Bahrain, did in 2020. Oman's refusal to oppose Egypt's and Jordan's peace treaties with Israel, its friendly ties with Iran, and its decision not to downgrade relations with Syria during the civil war, further illustrate its independent foreign policy.¹¹ Similarly, while Oman has never provided material support to Hamas, it has also refrained from designating the group as a terrorist organization. Significantly, Oman is among the few Arab states that have welcomed Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh, who attended Sultan Qaboos's funeral in January 2020 and met with the new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, to commend Qaboos's steadfast support for the Palestinian cause. In line with this approach, Oman reiterated its unwavering stance and categorical rejection of any attempts to displace the population of the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territories. It also called for the need to respect the Palestinians' rights to their land. At the same time, it maintains a policy of promoting a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian issue, based on legitimate international resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative, and insisting on the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.¹²

Despite its widely praised neutrality and facilitative diplomacy, Oman's foreign policy is not without limitations. Its quiet approach tends to focus on offering space for dialogue rather than actively influencing the outcome of negotiations. This means that while it helps facilitate communication, it does not always produce concrete results or significant changes in regional dynamics. Additionally, Oman's increasing reliance on Saudi Arabia and other GCC states for economic support may limit its ability to maintain full independence in its foreign policy, especially on issues where Saudi interests conflict with those of Iran. This is something that in the future could potentially affect its credibility as a neutral mediator.

Oman's foreign policy, however, is also driven by its own strategic goals. By maintaining relationships with a range of regional actors, including Iran, Israel, Hamas, and the Houthis, Oman aims to safeguard its security and protect vital trade routes. Supporting the Palestinian cause and refusing to normalize relations with Israel, until certain conditions are met, also helps Oman maintain its stand-



ing within the Arab world, especially as other GCC states move closer to Israel. Ultimately, Oman's foreign policy is a balancing act that serves its national interests, while also positioning itself as a key diplomatic player in the region.

Though Oman is often described as a mediator, it functions more accurately as a facilitator—offering space for dialogue without direct participation. Its behind-the-scenes role has enabled sensitive exchanges between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as Iran and the United States, reinforcing Muscat's reputation for trusted neutrality. Oman's foreign policy is a careful balancing act, built on neutrality, regional talks, and engagement with all sides, even with controversial groups. As the Middle East faces growing instability, Oman's quiet diplomatic efforts offer a rare and valuable model of peace facilitation.

NOTES

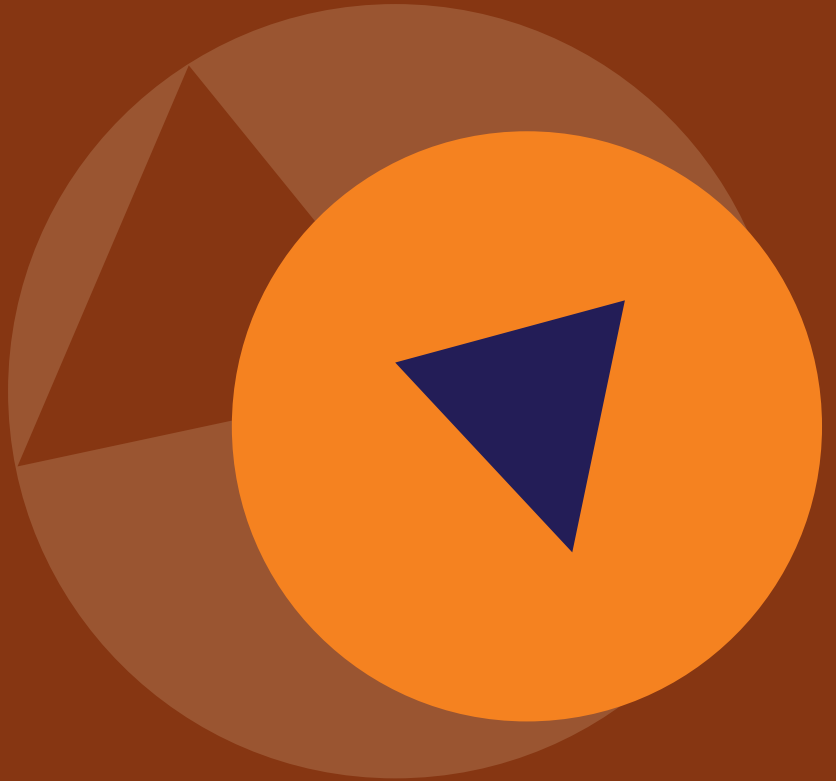
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ALGERIA

From Decolonization to Political Realignment and Declining Regional Influence



Alexandros Papamichalopoulos

Following the October 2023 Gaza war, Algeria reaffirmed its traditional support for Palestine, emphasizing its anti-colonial ethos on the international stage while navigating domestic sensitivities. At the same time, Algeria sought to reinforce its diplomatic presence by reviving former regional initiatives. In balancing public sentiment with geopolitical aspirations, it now faces the challenge of transforming symbolic solidarity into strategic influence —both at home and abroad.

AFTER GAINING INDEPENDENCE FROM FRENCH COLONIAL RULE, the Algerian political system evolved into a centralized state dominated by the FLN and the military, marking an authoritarian turn rooted in elite power structures and state-dependent economic models. The system's flaws became more apparent with the annulment of elections during the 1990s by the government, as a reaction to the Islamist FIS's favorable results, sparking civil war and the consolidation of a repressive state apparatus centered around the presidency, army, and intelligence services. Regionally, Algeria supported independence movements and strengthened its involvement in organizations like the Arab League and the African Union.¹

Under President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999–2019), the regime was characterized by stagnation, nepotism, and systemic corruption. Although Bouteflika promoted amnesty to pacify post-civil war unrest, real power remained with the military and bureaucracy. His attempt to seek a fifth term despite poor health, and the regime's resistance to democratic reform, sparked the Hirak uprising on February 22, 2019. What began as opposition to Bouteflika evolved into broader demands for systemic change, including political demilitarization, judicial independence, and generational renewal.

Bouteflika eventually resigned, but the army, led by Ahmed Gaid Salah, facilitated the rise of Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a regime insider who promised reform while preserving the status quo. The transition failed to meet Hirak's demands, with repression, media control, and judicial pressure used to discredit the movement. Tebboune's presidency was viewed as a continuation of the old system, marked by an election boycotted by large segments of society. His 2020 constitutional reforms introduced term limits and parliamentary oversight but failed to dismantle entrenched authoritarian structures.²

The COVID-19 pandemic further enabled the regime to suppress dissent. Protests were banned, and activists, journalists, and union leaders were detained. Voter turnout remained low, particularly in regions like Kabylia, reflecting deep mistrust. Meanwhile, the opposition was ideologically fragmented and lacked coordination between Hirak supporters and electoral actors.³

In terms of foreign policy, Algeria has historically emphasized non-intervention, peaceful conflict resolution, bilateralism and support for liberation movements such as the PLO, with which it established formal relations in 1962-63 and offered military training at the Cherchell Military Academy and the Sahrawi People, to whom it offered logistical support (1975-1976) and humanitarian assistance (1976-1990).⁴ After a period of post-independence activism and later isolation during the civil war, Algeria re-emerged

under Bouteflika. It played a role in founding the African Union, mediated conflicts such as the one between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and leveraged oil revenues to foster ties with Russia and China.

Algeria's relationship with France remains vital, particularly in migration and counterterrorism. Joint ventures like oil exploitation at the Timimoun field reflect strategic cooperation, with Algeria supplying two million tons of oil to help



stabilize Europe's energy needs following the Ukraine conflict.⁵ The EU continues to depend on Algeria for both energy and migration control.

Regarding Algeria's regional policy in Africa, the country has sought to assert itself as a stabilizing force and a key security actor in the Sahel region. Algeria created the CEMOC in 2010 with Mali, Niger, and Mauritania to coordinate military and intelligence efforts in the Sahel. It signed cooperation agreements in defense, infrastructure, and energy with Mauritania; promoted energy and diplomatic efforts with Mali; and focused on border security and counterterrorism with Niger. It also re-engaged with African Union platforms like APSA.⁶

However, Algeria's influence in the Sahel has declined since 2021. Mali's military regime rejected Algerian mediation efforts, viewing them as interference. This tension was exacerbated by Algeria's harboring of former Tuareg leaders and previous missteps—such as collaborating with France for airspace access and failing to enforce the 2012 Mali peace agreement. Algeria's regional influence is being sidelined as countries like Russia, Turkey, and the UAE have expanded their regional roles. The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and their pivot to Russia and China has further marginalized Algeria.⁷

Moreover, relations with Morocco have also worsened, especially over Western Sahara. Tensions peaked in 2021, when the Algerian government discovered that Morocco spied on its officials and citizens using Pegasus spyware, spilling into cyberspace with cyberattacks and hacktivism, prompting increased military spending on both sides. Though Tunisia's recognition of the Polisario Front is a diplomatic win for Algeria, the United States' pro-Morocco stance pressures Algeria to overcome the skepticism of Arab states regarding its relationship with Iran in order to achieve greater collaboration with the Arab world.⁸

Furthermore, the war in Gaza continues to stir national sentiment in Algeria, rooted in its revolutionary, anti-colonial legacy. As a non-permanent UN Security Council member (2024–2025), Algeria framed the Palestinian issue within international law and advocated for full UN membership for Palestine.⁹ It previously hosted Palestinian factions' unity talks and maintains a strict anti-normalization stance. In October 2023, mass pro-Palestine protests—the first large-scale mobilization since COVID-19—reflected strong public support. However, the government suppressed some marches, revealing a contradiction between its pro-Palestine rhetoric and its fear of renewed domestic dissent akin to the HIRAK. Hence, this duality on the Gaza issue serves as both a rallying point and a test of regime legitimacy.

In conclusion, for Algeria to play a crucial regional role in the post-Gaza war era, reconciliation with HIRAK supporters is essential, alongside the initiation of peace-talks with the Malian government, the easing of diplomatic tensions with Morocco, and the maintenance of a leading presence at the June 2025 two-state solution conference for Palestine.



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