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NINE WARS AND ONE PEACE THAT CHANGED THE MIDDLE EAST



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WARS HAVE BEEN among the most enduring and transformative forces shaping the modern Middle East. They have redrawn borders, overturned political orders, generated new ideologies, and reconfigured regional and international balances of power. Yet Middle Eastern wars are not simply regional conflicts confined to a particular geography. They have repeatedly reflected broader transformations in the international system, from the decline of European empires and the bipolar order of the Cold War to the rise of American unipolarity and, perhaps today, to the emergence of a more fluid and contested global order. This issue of Middle East Bulletin seeks to examine these wars not as isolated episodes, but as interconnected historical moments whose causes, trajectories, and consequences continue to shape the politics of the Middle East and its place in the world. It is very difficult to classify the wars in the Middle East from 1917 to the present, yet such a classification is useful insofar as it facilitates their comparative analysis. The wars of the Middle East may be divided into three broad categories.

The first can be viewed as a legacy of the age of empires and indirect colonial rule through the Mandate system. The Arab–Israeli wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973 represent a continuation of the problems bequeathed by the political construction of the Middle East by Britain and France, and above all they are the legacy of the most important anti-colonial uprising of the period, the Arab Revolt in Palestine in 1936. Although these wars sought to settle accounts inherited from the Mandate era, they nevertheless unfolded within a completely different international system—that of Cold War bipolarity—with all the implications this entailed for alliance strategies and ideological frameworks.

The second category comprises what might be termed counter-revolutionary wars. These include the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s and Israel’s war against Hezbollah in 2006. The objective of the Iran–Iraq War was to overthrow the revolutionary regime established by the Islamic Revolution. Indeed, the coalition arrayed against Iran included not only Iraq and the conservative monarchies of the Gulf but also the Soviet Union, the United States, France and Britain. Similarly, the war against Hezbollah aimed primarily at neutralizing the strategic arm of what could be described as a quasi-Islamist “international,” which Iran referred to as the “Axis of Resistance.”

The final category includes wars that marked transformations in the international system itself. The Suez Crisis of 1956 was the clearest demonstration of the United States’ ascendancy within the Western camp at the expense of the old colonial empires of Britain and France. The wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003 constituted central elements of the U.S. strategy to establish and consolidate the unipolar international order. Finally, the war waged by the United States and Israel against Iran in February 2026, and their failure to neutralize either Iran’s strategic influence or its political system, may prove to be a harbinger of a profound transformation of the international system—although the contours of the new order remain far from clear.

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SHOCK AND AWE IN REVERSE

The Iran War Beyond
Victory and Defeat

Ilias Mitrousis

The US-Israeli war against Iran has been under a fragile ceasefire since April 7. As the war has yet to conclude, assessments about its trajectory remain premature. This article attempts to trace the emerging trends that the war has created or accelerated in the region, as well as beyond.



A **MIDST OMANI-MEDIATED US-IRAN NEGOTIATIONS**, on February 28, 2026, the US and Israel launched a joint air war against Iran. According to Trump, the reportedly Israeli-conceived "Operation Epic Fury" would rapidly dismantle Iran's nuclear and ballistic capabilities, neutralize its regional proxies, and —implicitly— facilitate regime change through popular uprising. Following Hezbollah's missile attacks, Israel also invaded southern Lebanon to create a buffer zone and apply military and political pressure to achieve the party's disarmament. However, the anticipated upheavals failed to materialize. Hezbollah's unexpectedly intense resistance boosted its political capital among parts of the Lebanese public, helping it deflect calls for disarmament. Furthermore, Iranians rallied around the flag against a perceived assault on the nation, allowing the regime to concentrate on external defence.¹ Iran responded to the US-Israel assault with a "mosaic" defence doctrine designed to prevent rapid collapse after decapitation strikes against the political and military leadership. At the same time, it closed the Straits of Hormuz, making prolonged war an immediate threat to the global economy, and retaliated asymmetrically against both the US presence and its host countries, amplifying the war's regional cost. By the Pakistan-mediated ceasefire of 7 April, the increasingly IRGC-controlled regime had survived, denying its enemies the kind of "shock and awe" victory associated with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, while its allies remained far from neutralized and Iran retained significant nuclear and ballistic capabilities. Most consequentially, Iran's control of Hormuz now serves both as the cornerstone of its post-war deterrence and as a lever for its international re-socialization through negotiations with trade-dependent states.²

Israel has sought to undermine the ceasefire, either by intensively bombing Lebanon or by lobbying Washington to resume bombing Iran. This reflects Israeli strategic thinking that security can be achieved only when every regional competitor remains decisively weakened. However, sustaining extended operations across multiple theatres keeps Israel structurally dependent on US support, while increasing war fatigue domestically. The experiences of Gaza, Iran, and Lebanon demonstrate a recurring pattern: under a 'permanent security' doctrine and the presumption of unconditional US underwriting, Tel Aviv plans wars premised on overestimating its military capabilities. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff's recent warning that "the IDF is going to implode" underscores that even US support may prove insufficient to offset the consequences of overextension.³ The US also faces costs from prolonging the conflict with Iran, which Israel cannot offset. An Ipsos poll across 31 countries found that an overall 81% opposed their countries' military involvement in the war, including over 70% of Americans. Domestically, rising fuel prices and inflation are jeopardizing Republican prospects ahead of November's midterms, while an unprecedented 60% of Americans now view Israel unfavourably. Even without a fathomable change in US policy, these shifts may constrain future administrations' unconditional backing of Israel.⁴

The war has paradoxically inverted the logic of the US's presence in the Gulf. Instead of deterring Iranian barrages, the US bases invited them, resulting in a depletion of anti-ballistic munitions and extensive damage. This shattered the monarchies' long-cultivated image as investment-friendly economies insulated from regional upheavals. Furthermore, all 13 US Gulf bases had been largely evacuated, and the Fifth Fleet's headquarters had been relocated from Bahrain to Florida. Given that most Gulf leaders had advised Trump against attacking Iran, trust in the US defensive credibility collapsed.⁵ Subsequently, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman favour negotiations to reach a *modus vivendi* with Iran, considering Israel an equally —if not more— destabilizing factor in the



region. Saudi Arabia has reportedly discussed the idea of a regional non-aggression pact that includes Iran. Conversely, the UAE — which Tehran accuses of participating in the war— and Bahrain have adopted a more confrontational stance. As the UAE is moving closer to the US and Israel, its recent exit from OPEC also signals an escalating rift with Saudi Arabia, which may foreshadow further divergence within the GCC. Most importantly, the Gulf states appear to be stepping up their hedging. Although they may not move away from US security cooperation, most are diversifying their defence inventories, partnering with countries such as Turkey, South Korea, Ukraine, and Britain, while seeking to deepen economic and technological ties with China. Diplomatically, the quartet of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and Pakistan that emerged during the war and produced the latter as mediator may foreshadow new players in a future Gulf security architecture.⁶

Beyond the belligerents and the Gulf, the war sent shockwaves across the region, forcing all countries to perform balancing acts. Despite sporadic Iranian missiles targeting the US presence in Turkey, the country opposed a US-Israeli-backed Kurdish ground incursion from northern Iraq. Apart from a potential flare-up of Kurdish separatism, Ankara is wary that Iranian state fragmentation could produce a hegemonic Israel and intensify the Turkish-Israeli rivalry, particularly given that Israeli voices are increasingly framing Turkey as “the new Iran.” The war may subsequently trigger an arms race between Turkey and Israel. Egypt similarly adopted neutrality and participated in de-escalation efforts, reflecting both the war's economic toll and an opportunity to elevate its posture in the region.⁷ Moreover, Cairo's engagement with frameworks such as the quartet likely reflects concerns about a hegemonic Israel, particularly given Tel Aviv's intent to displace Palestinians from Gaza.

Syria and Jordan have declared neutrality. Tactically, both preserve their pro-Western alignment, with Damascus tightening its Lebanese and Iraqi borders to constrain Hezbollah's resupply, and Amman assisting allied forces in intercepting Iranian projectiles over its airspace. Even by avoiding direct entanglement, both face spillover from the Gulf's economic damage. Jordan's economy depends on tourism, funding, and remittances from the monarchies, while Syria needs Gulf capital for post-civil-war reconstruction. Moreover, as anti-Palestinian pogroms in the West Bank intensify under the cover of war, the revival of Israel's “alternative homeland” plan triggers Jordanian existential anxiety, further imperilling the cold peace with Israel.⁸

Apart from the devastating economic damage inflicted by the Hormuz closure —hydrocarbons fund over 90% of state revenues with limited alternative export routes— Iraq emerged as a secondary war theatre. As pro-Iranian militias struck US assets, the resurgence of US-Iran competition for influence has placed Iraq's government in a precarious position. Iraq's trajectory thus remains contingent on how Washington and Tehran emerge from the war.⁹ In Yemen,



Ansar Allah (Houthis), beyond rhetorical support for Iran and intermittent threats to close Bab el-Mandeb, has demonstrated restraint absent Tehran's explicit call for assistance. This posture likely indicates strategic autonomy, premised on avoiding escalation with Saudi Arabia to prioritize the movement's state-building project.

Beyond the shattered regional security architecture, the war has accelerated the decay of international legal norms and diplomacy, from routinized strikes on the nuclear facilities of an NPT signatory to negotiations used as deception and war-crime threats issued online by government officials. As a result, accelerating international rearmament and nuclear proliferation appear likely, as comparisons between Tehran's and Pyongyang's experiences with Washington become inescapable. Furthermore, with Iran having successfully upgraded Ukraine's paradigm of defending against nuclear powers, asymmetric denial now appears established and replicable, opening a new chapter for the conduct of war with fewer restrictions. Most consequentially, by exposing the limits of American material and diplomatic power, the war has precipitated the rise of new powers, not by challenging Washington, but because the US can no longer dominate entirely.¹⁰ Tellingly, China, having kept a discreet stance, emerges as a predictable and responsible actor in an unpredictable world. The successive visits to Beijing by Iran's Araghchi, Putin, and Trump within a fortnight testify to a consolidating 'pivot to multipolarity.'

What follows the war on Iran seems not to be stable, but rather an increasingly armed and less bound-by-rules regional and international environment, favouring conflict expansion, but offering fewer prospects for containment. In short, the post-Cold War order has not only been weakened by this war, but crushed.



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The Great War and the Making of the Middle East



Charitini Petrodaskalaki

On the eve of the First World War, what is known as the Middle East was the area where the Ottoman, Persian, Russian and British empires met; the war deeply affected the rivaling states as well as the people, creating or deepening existing tensions between populations. The post-war settlements, culminating in the Treaty of Lausanne, created the modern Middle East and left enduring legacies of imperialism and contested nationalisms.

THE GREAT WAR was the defining moment that shaped the direction of the Middle East for the next hundred years.¹ To the Ottoman ruling party, the Committee of Union and Progress, the war presented an opportunity to stand up to European encroachment, regain imperial losses and possibly expand into Russian territory.² The Ottomans launched a surprise attack in November 1914 against the Russian Empire, and under German pressure, Sultan Mehmet V Reşad declared a Jihad against the Entente powers. On the other hand, the British officially declared Egypt their protectorate and swiftly launched the Mesopotamian Campaign to protect their interests in the area, mainly the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. At the same time, British and Russian troops also entered the officially neutral Persian Empire to protect their zones of interest.

From the perspective of the Entente, the Ottoman Empire wasn't considered an important factor in the war outcome and anticipated its imminent demise.³ Therefore, the British launched multiple campaigns against them, believing this was the way to "win the war".⁴ However, even if the Ottoman offensives in the Caucasus, Persia, and even Egypt were poorly planned, badly executed, and ineffectual, the Ottoman defense showed high military capabilities and resilience, as witnessed in the Gallipoli Campaign and the siege of Kut.⁵ Ultimately, the Ottoman army did not collapse by the end of the war, but had to surrender when Germany did, as there was no way to continue without their main ally.

The war had a significant impact on the people of the region, ushering in the post-war political developments. The martial law in Egypt expanded into legal, economic and political fields, building significant resentment over economic hardships and forced conscription of labour workers, and by the end of the war the countryside resembled an "economic and social battleground".⁶ The invasion of neutral Persia led to political collapse, multiple civilian casualties, famine and significant unrest. In the Ottoman Empire, almost all socio-economic classes experienced shortages, famine, repression or displacement, as well as forced conscription for either the military or the labour force. Wartime tensions between communities were quite pronounced and deteriorated over the course of the Great War, leading to significant acts of violence, such as the mass relocation and massacre of the Armenian and Greek communities in 1915. Unrest and rioting were common, with some being encouraged by the French in an attempt to disorient the empire; the retribution against those who opposed the war effort was brutal, as seen by the public executions by Cemal Pasha.⁷ As Fawaz mentions, "this is the war that everyone in the region remembers, far more than World War II".⁸

Amidst the general unrest within Ottoman lands during the war, the Great Arab Revolt by Sherif Hussein of Mecca stands out as the most impactful for the outcome of the war. The British subsidized the rebellion to destabilize the Ottoman Empire, while offering support for the creation of an Arab Kingdom, but purposely leaving its borders ill-defined. In addition, the British closely advised Emir Faisal as he captured Hejaz, and coordinated operations with the Arab irregulars in some key battles, therefore enabling expansion towards Syria. By the end of the war, the Ottomans had lost control of their Arab lands to the British and Faisal's army.

The Making of the Middle East

The Entente powers were wary of one another and anxious to secure their own imperial ambitions in the post-war order. Therefore,



they engaged in several secret negotiations, leading to the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, dividing the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire between France and Britain, with Palestine under international control, openly disregarding any previous agreement with the Arabs; the deal was ratified by their ally, the Russian Empire, in exchange for the Straits and other concessions. Yet, after the Russian Revolution and the publication of the agreement among other secret documents by the Bolsheviks, anti-imperial sentiments and ideologies such as decolonization and self-determination were prevalent in the political discourse; combined with the nascent nationalist movements in the area, it was clear that this type of division of spoils the French and British envisioned could not stand in the post-war order.

In this context, the concept of the “Middle East” emerged, as the British needed a term to differentiate between what was known as the Near East or the Orient - an area largely considered by the West as a homogenous part of the Ottoman Empire - and the areas they now wanted under imperial control. British propaganda now described the region as “the Birth of Civilization”, a place of repressed nations that required liberation and foreign guidance. Therefore, this new term legitimized their territorial claims under the guise of self-determination with the creation of the mandate system.⁹

This self-serving support for self-determination can be seen in practice. By subsidizing Faisal’s army, they were making him dependent on Britain and therefore more likely to be exploited in favor of British interests when the war ended. By the same token, unsatisfied with the agreement with their allies over Palestine, the British turned towards Zionism and the idea of supporting the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine to secure British interests there. The Balfour Declaration in 1917 and the public support for

a Jewish state in Palestine after the US entered the war was a calculated decision to invade Palestine without being accused of imperialistic ambitions.¹⁰ Due to British calculations, the narrative of Jewish self-determination was promoted more than its Arab counterpart.¹¹

Post-war settlement and the Treaty of Lausanne

The fate of the Middle East wouldn’t be determined at the Paris Peace Conference despite the presence of multiple delegations with nationalist aspirations. The years leading to the finalization of the post-war settlement in 1923 and the Treaty of Lausanne were filled with fighting and violence that shaped the region’s future.

On one hand, the imperial forces marched through the region, enforcing the spirit of the Sykes-Picot agreement and their other internal agreements. The 1920 San Remo Conference officially defined the new political order of the region, with the League of Nations granting them “Mandates”, legitimizing the control they had already established on the ground; This led to the carving out of multiple new states based on their interests



and disregarding the demands of the local population. The mandates were met with unrest and resistance from the locals, who were caught between several opposing ideas of nationalism; the brutal repression by the French and British forces, particularly in Syria, Iraq and Palestine, stirred nationalism and a hatred of the West. What is more, the European powers institutionalized confessional politics in the region, primarily in Lebanon and in Palestine, including preferential arrangements for religious minorities and local proxies, deepening the tensions and having lasting effects.

On the other hand, new nation-states emerged in defiance and resistance to imperialism. The Turkish War of Independence began in 1919 after Mustafa Kemal Pasha was assigned to restore order to Ottoman military units; ignited by the designs over Ottoman partition, exemplified by the Greek army's disembarkation in Izmir. In the end the Turks managed to cancel the Treaty of Sevres, successfully fight off Greek, French and British troops and reclaim the land in Anatolia and Cilicia, thus establishing the Turkish Republic. The Treaty of Lausanne officially re-negotiated the terms of Ottoman partition. At the same time, the post-war continuation of the British military rule, combined with the arrest of the nationalists' leader, Saad Zaghlul, prompted the Egyptian Revolution of 1919; this led to the unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence in 1922, despite the British still controlling the country's foreign policy.

In conclusion, the Middle East that we know today was created and shaped during and after the Great War. The main elements – imperial involvement, anti-imperial sentiments, contested nationalisms and confessional politics continue to shape the socio-political landscape to this day.



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THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1948-49 ARAB-ISRAELI WAR

COMPETING NATIONALISMS, FOUNDATIONAL GRIEF
AND THE SEEDS FOR REGIONAL SHIFT



Stavros Drakoularakos



The 1948-49 Arab-Israeli war is often regarded as the armed conflict that jump-started the Palestinian question and became the lynchpin from which most bilateral clashes until the 1970s in the region took their cue. Nonetheless, this article argues that the 1948-49 war left a lasting mark on the states in the Middle Eastern region and bore an even greater impact than formerly anticipated from – and to – all parties involved. Arab nationalism and regime change, as well as Israel's periphery doctrine and Holocaustia, will be examined as side effects of the war, which altered the domestic and regional modus operandi of Middle Eastern states.

THE CLASHES ERUPTED AS A DIRECT REACTION to the Israeli declaration of independence in 1948, when Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan and Iraq declared war against the Israeli state, aiming at reversing the *fait accompli* and restoring the previous status quo. The clashes between the Arab coalition, Israel and other volunteer militias and forces eventually concluded with the 1949 armistice agreements, irrevocably changing the territorial landscape of the Fertile Crescent area. By the same token, in the wake of the war most warring parties were left with their territorial sovereignty altered or enlarged: Israel controlled 78 percent of the former Mandatory Palestine; Transjordan annexed the West Bank and East Jerusalem and rebranded as Jordan in 1950; while Egypt administered the Gaza Strip. Although the new “Green Line” borders were considered temporary, they became Israel’s *de facto* boundaries until the 1967 Six-Day War. At the same time, the Palestinian people, besides suffering heavy casualties, were divided into separate areas administered by Israel, Egypt and Jordan, further accentuating the demographic shift already occurring since the interwar era.¹

Pinpointing the immediate causes of the 1948-49 war leads to a specific series of developments including: the mass migration of Jews to Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s, referred to as *Aliyah* waves; the rise and clashes of Jewish and Arab militias in Palestine; the rejection of UN Partition Plan 181/1947; the sudden end of the British Mandate for Palestine in 1948; the still fresh memory of the Holocaust; but also the international order transitioning from the interwar and Second World War periods to the Cold War.²

Nonetheless, the first Arab–Israeli war and its outcome facilitated the emergence of an Israeli foreign policy grounded in self-reliance, a commitment to ensuring state survival, and the pursuit of alternative regional partnerships and opportunities. Since a great power repositioning was in effect, a tangible window of opportunity for establishing Israel was opened in the late 1940s, through which the grief (and Western-based guilt) of the Shoah (“catastrophe”) would be recalibrated into a foundational state and national identity narrative. Hence, Holocaustia, as defined by Lustick, emerged as a worldview prevalent across the Israeli political spectrum, which frames Jewish existence as being under the enduring and collective threat of genocide. More generally, it posited that the spectre of annihilation is ever-present in Israel’s national consciousness and constitutes a defining feature of Jewish identity. From this perspective, the Holocaust underscored the need for establishing a state capable of guaranteeing both the physical safety and existential security of the Jewish people. From that moment on, the fear of replication of the Holocaust would drive domestic and foreign policy initiatives for the following decades.³

Moreover, the concept of the Iron Wall (originally from 1923) emerged as a central tenet of Israeli strategic thinking. It sought to ensure, through the systematic and calibrated application of military force, that hostile states would be deterred from acting upon their threats or opposition to Israel, irrespective of whether Israel’s actions were regarded as legitimate or justified. The Iron Wall was promoted as a psychological barrier, through which it would be made clear to Arabs that there would



be no hope of ever defeating Israel by force of arms. At the same time, the tenets of the Iron Wall concept were rooted in striving to guarantee that Israel would always prevail and remain on the militarily advantageous end of any future Arab-Israeli conflict.⁴

Furthermore, the Periphery Doctrine was developed in the 1950s as a strategy aimed at countering regional isolation and Arab hostility by forging formal or secret relations with potential friendly state or non-state actors in Israel's extended periphery. The results of this doctrine are most famously twofold: first, in the secret Trident agreement of 1958 between Israel, Turkey and Iran; and second, in the establishment of close ties with friendly minorities in hostile countries such as the Maronites in Lebanon, the Kurds in Iraq and the Christians in Sudan. The doctrine's driving tenets would aid Israel in navigating regional insecurity and in establishing itself as a state deeply embedded in Middle Eastern interests and power plays.⁵

At the same time, the conflict revealed several issues concerning the Arab states involved. Although they stood and fought together against their mutual foe, the intervention of Arab military forces proved unsuccessful in pushing through and achieving their stated objective. Instead, with the challenge not being met, questions were raised with regard to military apparatus and its preparedness, the relationship with the West, as well as the standing of monarchical regimes. Their failure in reversing the establishment of Israel became one of the prevailing factors which led to regime change in later years. Egypt, Syria and Iraq witnessed military coups led by officers (dubbed later on by historians as the New Men) overthrowing the previous regimes, eventually establishing Nasserism and the Ba'ath Party as the trending and successful state ideologies. In other words, Arab nationalism shifted gears since the First World War, gaining momentum and seeking a leadership figure to take on the mantle of steering Arab interests in the midst of the bipolar world.⁶

With the New Men at the helm, the upgrading of the military apparatus and a stronger international and regional standing became a priority in an effort to ensure that history would not repeat itself. Hence, economic and military relations with the USSR slowly warmed and blossomed throughout the 1950s, while, over the next two decades, Nasser slowly emerged as the dominant leader of the Arab world.⁷

Additionally, the Palestinian issue became the crux through which the new Arab leadership could rally and cooperate within the Arab League. The mass internal and external displacement, dispossession and flight of the Palestinian people during the 1948-49 war is referred to as the Nakba ("catastrophe"). The latter's standing is twofold: on the one hand, it acts as the memory of the grievance that occurred; on the other, it took on even greater symbolism as the ongoing Nakba, a process that kept occurring throughout the decades. Consequently, the latter encapsulated the bitterness of defeat for the new Arab regimes. It became the cornerstone of foundational grief within their reconstructed national identities, making the reversal of the crisis the ultimate test of their future political legitimacy.⁸

In retrospect, the 1948-49 war fundamentally shifted the foreign policy drivers and *raison d'être* of Middle Eastern states with regard to their relationship with the West, intra-Arab regional cooperation, as well as the rise and establishment of Arab nationalism through different forms. While the 1990s Oslo process ceremoniously concluded the era jump-started by the first instance of the



Arab-Israeli conflict, the regional vibrations generated by its aftermath resonated throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, eventually becoming the fulcrum of new state identity narratives, partnerships and leadership aspirations.

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THE SUEZ CRISIS AND ITS WORLDWIDE IMPACT

FROM 1956 TO THE PRESENT



Alexandra Vasilou

The Suez Crisis of 1956 serves as a definitive turning point in modern history, marking the violent end of European imperial hegemony and the emergence of a new global order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. The crisis was not merely a localized conflict over a waterway; it was a "leader's crisis" fueled by the personal ambitions and animosities of men like Anthony Eden, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. While popularly remembered as a triumph of Arab nationalism, the event was equally shaped by secret diplomatic collusion and a failed attempt by domestic Egyptian dissidents to utilize the invasion as a catalyst for regime change.

The U.S. utilized its economic might to force a ceasefire. As market fears caused the British currency to crash, Eisenhower blocked a vital IMF loan to Britain until they agreed to withdraw.⁴ Simultaneously, the Soviet Union threatened to fire rockets at Paris and London, further escalating the risk of a third world war.⁵ Under immense financial and diplomatic pressure, and facing a revolt within his own party, Eden called a ceasefire on November 6, just two days after British troops had landed.

Worldwide Impact: From 1956 to the Present

Winthrop W. Aldrich (1885-1974), former United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom, highlighted a severe breakdown in communication between the United States and its allies. Key decisions were made without coordination: the U.S. withdrew Aswan Dam funding without informing its London embassy, while Britain and France launched military action without warning Washington, an act seen as "catastrophic."⁶

For Britain and France, Suez was a humiliating fiasco that forced them to accept their new status as "second-rank powers". It accelerated the decolonization of Africa and the Middle East, as nationalist movements were emboldened by the sight of two former empires being humbled by an Arab state.

The emergence of the United States as the primary Western power in the Middle East was confirmed by the Eisenhower Doctrine of late 1956, which pledged American protection for Arab nations against Soviet expansion. This marked the first independent American guarantee to the region, setting a precedent for U.S. military involvement that stretched into the Iraq War and the 21st century. The Soviet Union also gained significantly from the Suez debacle, reaping the "laurels" in the eyes of many Arab states for supposedly bringing down the "colonialist aggressors".

For the Arab world, Nasser became an undisputed hero, his memory still revered across the Middle East for his opposition to foreign intervention. Yet, the crisis also permanently militarized the region, leading to a decades-long superpower stalemate. The crisis was used by the military regime to suppress political pluralism and close off alternative avenues for popular nationalism. Opposition groups, like the Wafd Party and the Muslim Brotherhood, which had hoped to utilize the international intervention to restore constitutional rule, were instead branded as "imperialist agents" and effectively banished to obscurity.⁷ This paved the way for decades of authoritarian military rule in Egypt, as the crisis precluded any viable political competition to Nasser's hegemony. The United Nations also gained a new operational role through the creation of its first major peacekeeping force, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), which arrived in Egypt in November 1956 to oversee the withdrawal of the invading forces.

The vacuum left by British withdrawal also catalyzed the rise of new regional middle powers, most notably Pahlavi's Iran. Mohammad Reza Shah utilized the shift in global dynamics to remake Iran as a key partner of the United States, under the Nixon Doctrine. Seeing himself as a modernizing anti-communist bulwark, the Shah lobbied the U.S. to recognize Iranian primacy in the Persian Gulf, arguing that a strong Iran could maintain stability and secure the flow of oil without the need for another costly Vietnam-style involvement. This "Iranian interregnum" between the age of Pax Britannica and modern American hegemony demonstrated



how regional actors could successfully harness superpower grand strategy to serve their local ambitions and national interests.⁸

Finally, the long-term impact on Western military alliances was profound. The perceived betrayal of France by its American ally during the Suez situation, paralyzed NATO and sowed the seeds of distrust that eventually led to France's withdrawal from integrated NATO military commands. Disillusioned with its allies, France began developing its own independent nuclear deterrent, the "Force de Frappe", to ensure its security without relying on an American "atomic umbrella".⁹

Comparative Analysis: the Suez Canal versus the Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz, through which nearly 20% of global oil trade flows, functions today as one of the world's most important strategic chokepoints, comparable to the Suez Canal during the 1956 crisis.¹⁰ In 1956, Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal ended Anglo-French control and symbolized the decline of European imperial power within a Cold War bipolar system. By contrast, tensions in the Strait of Hormuz reflect a more complex environment shaped by US-Iran rivalry, nuclear concerns, and asymmetric warfare involving Iran's Revolutionary Guard, the US Navy, Gulf states, and regional proxy actors.

Despite these differences, both crises illustrate the use of chokepoints as instruments of political coercion. Nasser used the Suez Canal to assert sovereignty and extract concessions from great powers, while Iran's threats to disrupt Hormuz follow a similar logic of strategic pressure. In both cases, these chokepoints were embedded within wider power competitions – Suez within Soviet-US rivalry, and Hormuz within a broader global balance involving the US, China, Russia, as well as, the survival of Israel.

Unlike Suez, the Strait of Hormuz operates in a transformed military environment shaped by drones, missiles, cyber tools, and asymmetric proxy warfare rather than conventional armies. While the United States and Israel maintain overwhelming military superiority, Iran can still impose costs through indirect pressure, particularly via regional proxies and disruption of maritime routes.

This differs from 1956, when Egypt faced direct intervention by Britain, France, and Israel and was quickly defeated in conventional warfare. In contrast, the Hormuz balance is more fluid, with Iran remaining undefeated and able to influence regional security dynamics. Even without battlefield victory, these actions create measurable economic effects, including higher oil prices and increased shipping and insurance costs.



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The Aftermath of the Six Days War

Panagiota Bouka

The 1967 war marked a turning point in regional politics and territorial boundaries in the Middle East. This war was the culmination of escalating tensions between Israel and its neighbors. Although it lasted only six days, its consequences were profound. Israel's capture of territories from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, as well as East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, altered the political landscape and left a lasting impact on both Israeli and Palestinian national identities. Today, more than five decades later, the remnants of the Six-Day War continue to shape the region.

THE 1967 WAR was the third Arab-Israeli war, following the war for Palestine in 1948 and the Suez War in 1956.¹ It took place between 5 and 10 June 1967 and involved Israel fighting against neighboring Arab states, mainly Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The situation escalated when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, in May 1967, moved troops into the Sinai Peninsula, asked United Nations peacekeeping forces to withdraw, and closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, an action that Israel viewed as a direct threat.² Before the war began, Jordan's King Hussein bin Talal signed a defense pact with Egypt on 30 May 1967, placing Jordanian forces under Egyptian command. When Israel launched its attack on Egypt on 5 June, Jordan entered the war soon afterward.³ Jordanian artillery began shelling West Jerusalem and other Israeli positions. In response, Israeli forces opened an eastern front and launched a counteroffensive into the Jordanian-controlled West Bank.⁴ By 7 June, Israeli forces had taken East Jerusalem and most of the West Bank, marking one of the most politically significant outcomes of the war since it reunited the city for the first time since 1948. Additionally, Syria had already been involved in border clashes with Israel before 1967, and once the war began, Syrian forces launched artillery attacks in northern Israel from the Golan Heights. Even though during the first few days, Israel focused mainly on Egypt and Jordan, by 9 June, Israel launched a major ground assault on the heavily fortified Golan Heights. Despite the Syrian defenses, Israeli forces had captured most of the plateau within a day.⁵ The rapid destruction of much of Egypt's air force while it was still on the ground, and the attacks on Jordanian and Syrian air forces, gave Israel major military advantages and allowed its ground forces to advance rapidly on several fronts. The Arab armies had to operate without air cover, totally exposed to incessant bombardment by the Israeli air force. Between 5 and 10 June, Israeli forces achieved major territorial gains.⁶ On 10 June 1967, after successive United Nations ceasefire resolutions were accepted by the parties involved, the fighting came to an end. Although it lasted only six days, its consequences were long-lasting.⁷

Not only did the 1967 war change the map, but it also changed the political dynamics of the Middle East. Before 1967, the Palestinian cause was largely influenced by the surrounding Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan. These states often presented themselves as defenders of the Palestinian cause, but Palestinians themselves had limited independent political or military organization. Many Palestinians believed that their fate depended on broader Arab unity and conventional wars between Arab armies and Israel. They had largely submerged their own nationalism within the broader ideology of Arab nationalism, believing that united Arab military efforts would be the practical means to liberating Palestine. The defeat of Arab armies in 1967 forced Palestinians to realize that they could not rely solely on Arab armies to achieve their goals.⁸ In this context, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) gained prominence as an independent political and military organization. Under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, the PLO increasingly argued that Palestinians



should take the struggle for Palestinian self-determination into their own hands rather than relying on Arab governments.⁹ Hence, the PLO united almost all Palestinian factions both in the diaspora and within the Palestinian occupied territories. This marked an important shift in which the struggle was no longer seen only as a war between Israel and neighboring Arab states, but increasingly as a Palestinian-led war for self-determination and statehood.

Beyond the impact on Palestine, the war also transformed the wider Arab regional order. The 1967 defeat weakened the dominant position that Egypt had held in Arab politics throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The war exposed the limits of pan-Arab military unity and marked the gradual decline of pan-Arabism as the central political ideology of the region. The consequences of this war became especially visible in the upheaval in Jordan in 1970 and later in Lebanon's descent into civil war beginning in 1975. Military actions against Israel, including the shelling of civilian areas, helped provoke Israeli territorial expansion at the expense of neighboring states. Meanwhile, Syria used the consequences of the 1967 war to deepen its strategic relationship with the Soviet Union, expanding military and economic ties that would shape its regional posture for years to come. Even though Lebanon stayed outside the 1967 conflict, its weak state institutions and fragile sectarian political system made it increasingly vulnerable to the regional shifts that followed. This became more significant after the 1969 Cairo Agreement between the Lebanese government and the Palestinian leadership, which granted Palestinian organizations greater freedom to operate from Lebanese territory. The situation intensified after the PLO leadership was expelled from Amman in 1970-1971 and relocated its headquarters to Beirut. Lebanon became a safe haven for the Palestinians' national movement, enabling not only cross-border operations against Israel but also the consolidation of the PLO "state within a state," further destabilizing Lebanon and contributing directly to the outbreak of the civil war in 1975.¹⁰

The War of 1967 paved the way for religious nationalism in Israel. Albeit on the margins at the time, this movement viewed the territorial gains as a gift from God to the chosen people. Victory was explained as a miracle, demonstrating the interventionist, divine hand in history. It gave impetus to the movement, which gradually moved to the mainstream of Israeli politics, especially after the 1973 war; a trajectory that has continued to the present day. Israel would become a regional power as a result of the war, and American Jews, due to Israel's victory, would view U.S. support for Israel as an organizing principle. The U.S. began to view Israel as a strategic asset capable of checking Soviet influence in the region while the Soviet Union deepened its ties with Egypt and Syria, providing massive military aid to rebuild their shattered armies. Israel's view was that the Soviets could provide the material means for war, but only the U.S. could exert the influence for peace.¹¹ Lastly, the war brought legal and normative consequences at an international level. The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 established a framework that called for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied during the war, while simultaneously affirming the termination of states of belligerency and the recognition of every state's right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries. In practice, Resolution 242 became the main point of reference and the foundation for all future negotiations, including the 1979 Peace Treaty with Egypt and the 1990s Oslo Accords.¹²



Within six days in 1967, the landscape of the Middle East changed not only geographically but also politically. Borders changed, alliances shifted, ideologies weakened, and new national movements emerged. The war transformed not only the balance of power in the region but also how states, societies, and political movements understood themselves and their place in a changing Middle East. The violence that we are witnessing today is also a reminder that the political and territorial realities shaped in 1967 remain deeply embedded in the region.

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A SEPARATE PEACE

The Camp David Accords
and the Arab Order

Sarra Ajroud

In September 1978, three leaders gathered in the US presidential retreat, Camp David, to finally put an end to a thirty-year war between Israel and Egypt. Egyptian President al-Sadat, Premier Menachem Begin and US President Jimmy Carter, ended their negotiations by producing the first peace treaty between an Arab state and Israel. Hailed at the time as a diplomatic triumph, the agreement also reshaped the Middle East in ways its architects did not foresee.



"**AFTER FOUR WARS**, the Holy Land does not yet enjoy the blessings of peace", noted President Jimmy Carter in a joint statement on September 6, 1978, at Camp David.¹ Little did he, and the world, know that forty-eight years later this statement still stands. It was on September 5, 1978, that U.S. President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, and Israeli Premier Menachem Begin met at the presidential retreat in Maryland to negotiate what would become the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab state. Although the peace did not extend beyond Egypt and Israel, the Camp David Accords set a precedent of hope in a region exhausted by decades of war. Understanding the changes that occurred in the Middle East after the Camp David Accords requires retracing the history that led to those thirteen days in Maryland.

The Road to Maryland

Between 1948 and 1973, Egypt and Israel had fought four wars: the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that followed the founding of Israel, the 1956 Suez Crisis, the 1967 Six-Day War, in which Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, launched by Egypt and Syria to recover lost territory.

Despite Henry Kissinger's "step-by-step" shuttle diplomacy following 1973, no comprehensive peace had been reached.² Egypt and Israel entered 1977 still without diplomatic relations, formally at war, and with devastating casualties on both sides. This proved to be the tipping point for leaders in the Arab world and the West to reconsider what was worth fighting for.

The first to break this deadlock was Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, when he paid an unprecedented visit to Jerusalem in November 1977. "The world watched in disbelief", as he was the first Arab leader to ever set foot in Israel, and not just from any Arab nation, but from Egypt, the state that had led Arab opposition to Israel for three decades. Standing before the Knesset, Sadat shook hands with Premier Begin and famously promised "no more war."³

Berenji frames this as a calculated act of risk acceptance: unable to recover the Sinai Peninsula militarily, or through the stalled multilateral Geneva process, Sadat chose direct engagement with Israel as a tactical alternative. His calculus was also shaped by the economic situation at home. By the mid-1970s, Egypt was struggling under war spending and foreign debt, and the Nasser-era state economy was no longer sustainable.

Sadat's 1974 Infitah ("opening") policy was meant to liberalize the economy and attract Western and Gulf capital; however, this required a realignment toward the United States, and in turn a direct engagement with Israel. The Jerusalem visit opened the door to talks between Israel and Egypt at Ismailiya in December 1977 and at Leeds Castle in July 1978; however, neither succeeded in finding common ground. This had pushed U.S. President Jimmy Carter to hold a "summit meeting" in total privacy and seclusion from the outside world, in pursuit of 'peace in the Middle East'.⁴

Thirteen Days

On September 5, 1978, Carter welcomed the two heads of state at Camp David. Over the next thirteen days, which were chronicled



in detail in his memoir, the trio would negotiate what became the two Framework agreements signed on September 17, later known as “The Camp David Accords”. The summit's first days revealed how strained the relationship was: Begin and Sadat clashed almost immediately, and Carter was forced to abandon the trilateral format, spending the rest of the period shuttling between their cabins.⁵ The most contentious issue was the fate of Israeli civilian settlements in Sinai. The talks nearly collapsed over that, with Begin refusing to dismantle them and Sadat threatening to leave; only Carter's direct intervention salvaged the agreement, as Begin eventually agreed to their evacuation.

On September 17, the two leaders signed two Framework agreements; one document establishing an Egypt-Israel bilateral peace agreement, the other a vaguer formula for Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza. Nevertheless, the Framework was not the Peace Treaty itself. President Carter had hoped it would take only days before an official Treaty was signed. The negotiations lasted for six months. Israel, in the meantime, was expanding its territory by building more settlements in the West Bank, directly contravening the spirit of the Frameworks and intensifying Arab outrage against Egypt. Only after Carter's personal shuttle to Cairo and Jerusalem in March 1979 did the deal hold: on March 26, 1979, Sadat and Begin signed the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty on the White House lawn, the first peace agreement between Israel and any Arab state.⁶

These unprecedented events laid the foundation for what constitutes the Arab world order today. 1979 was not the last year that the US attempted to broker peace in the Middle East, nor would it be the last; in fact, one could even argue that the US is a Middle Eastern actor today. It was nonetheless a moment of pause in a region drained by war, and the foundation of every U.S.-brokered peace effort that followed.

Three Men, Three Victories, and One Exclusion

Anwar al-Sadat went to Camp David knowing he was gambling with his personal and political survival.⁷ He knew that he had to set aside the broader Arab cause, for the sake of territory, economy, and security. Israel agreed to a full withdrawal from the Sinai



Peninsula and Egypt was pulled out of the Soviet orbit and into the American one. As Cottam observes in his review of Quandt's account, Sadat's real prize was never simply peace with Israel: it was the U.S.-Egyptian alliance that would follow.⁸ The consequences of his decisions, however, have set his nation on a precarious path. In 1979, Egypt was expelled from the Arab League, and its headquarters moved from Cairo to Tunis. In 1981, Anwar al-Sadat was assassinated by Islamist officers within his own military, who saw peace with Israel as a betrayal.

On the other hand, Menachem Begin came to Camp David far



more strategically prepared.⁹ If Sadat gambled his political survival, Premier Begin gambled almost nothing. Indeed, he was the most successful of the three. He neutralized the Egyptian army, one of the largest militaries in the Arab world, established a recognized southern border and renewed U.S. security guarantees. As for the Palestinian matter, Framework I of the Accords, which on paper promised Palestinian autonomy, was vague enough to be safely ignored, as evidenced by the settlement expansion in the occupied Palestinian Territories that continued to accelerate throughout the 1980s. The strategic logic itself became apparent within four years: in June 1982, with Egypt no longer a military threat, Israel invaded Lebanon, a war that would have been impossible to sustain had Camp David not freed Israel's southern border.¹⁰

There remains one figure who was neither a gambler nor a strategist, but a broker. If Begin and Sadat each secured part of what they came for, Jimmy Carter and the United States won something much larger. After Camp David, a precedent in Middle Eastern affairs was set: the US became an indispensable broker in the region, a role Washington had not held before 1978 and has not relinquished since. Egypt's pivot from the Soviet to the American orbit was a decisive Cold War realignment: it removed the largest Arab state from the Soviet bloc and redrew the regional balance of power. More importantly, Camp David established the template every subsequent peace deal would follow: a U.S.-brokered, bilateral agreement that bypassed the broader Arab-Israeli issue. The 1993 Oslo Accords, the 1994 Jordan–Israel treaty, and the 2020 Abraham Accords all inherited the same structure and the same ambiguity.¹¹

The summit's stated aim was to find a path toward Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza. Yet, there was no Palestinian voice in the room as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was not invited. The Palestinian cause was acknowledged but left unresolved. Framework I promised "autonomous authority" for Palestinian inhabitants, but the language was vague enough to mean almost nothing, and the autonomy talks that followed collapsed by 1982. This was intentional and structural; Rashid Khalidi argues that the US had no intention of having the PLO as part of the negotiations; Washington had long maintained a policy of non-recognition of the PLO long before the Camp David Summit.¹² The picture thus becomes clearer as all three leaders walked into the retreat knowing, in one way or another, that the Palestinian cause was no longer a central issue in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In conclusion, Camp David established a precedent that had never been imagined before; even with its limitations, it remains historically significant. Camp David worked because of three rare conditions converging: a leader willing to break consensus, a leader willing to cede territory, and a mediator willing to spend his political capital. None of those three conditions are present in 2026.



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WAR WITHOUT VICTORY

The Iran-Iraq War and the
Remaking of the Middle East

Christina Aikaterini Fytli

This article examines the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) as a transformative conflict that reshaped the political, military and strategic landscape of the Middle East. It argues that the conflict altered regional power dynamics, reinforced authoritarian state structures, and redefined military practices through the normalization of attritional and unconventional warfare. Additionally, the war intensified the interdependence of economic and security concerns and contributed to enduring instability. By situating the conflict within a broader structural framework, the article highlights its lasting impact on subsequent regional conflicts and patterns of international involvement.

THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR, spanning from September 1980 to August 1988, is recognised as the longest conventional war of the 20th century, and one of the most lethal conflicts since World War II. This war, initiated under complex political, ideological, and territorial motivations, reshaped regional power dynamics, state-society relations, and external interventions. While it is often overshadowed by other conflicts in the region, its long-term effects on security, political alignments, and economic structures remain highly significant. This analysis seeks to illuminate the broader structural, political, and societal transformations that the conflict caused, emphasizing its enduring influence on the trajectory of the Middle East.

The Course of the War

The war erupted on September 22, 1980, when Iraq, under President Saddam Hussein, invaded Iran. Iraq's intervention was driven by a combination of strategic, political, and territorial aims, namely, to seize control of the oil-rich Khuzestan province, curb the spread of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and assert itself as the dominant Arab state in the Gulf. Iran, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, was still trying to consolidate its control after the Islamic Revolution, yet quickly mobilised both military forces and revolutionary militias, framing the conflict as a defensive jihad against aggression.

Initial Iraqi advances were met with severe resistance, resulting in a protracted stalemate along a heavily fortified front that extended over 1,000 kilometers. The war featured unprecedented levels of conventional and chemical warfare, with Iraq employing poison gas against both Iranian forces and Kurdish civilians, marking a new threshold in the conduct of modern conflicts. The conflict also introduced tactics such as the extensive use of human wave attacks by Iran and missile strikes against strategic economic and civilian targets in both countries.

With the war evolving into a prolonged stalemate and neither side achieving a decisive breakthrough, its international dimension became evident, prompting shifting alliances: Iraq gained the support of the U.S., the Soviet Union and the Gulf states, due to concerns over Iran's revolutionary ideology, while Iran faced isolation but leveraged its ideological appeal to mobilise volunteer fighters across

the region. By 1988, both states were economically and militarily exhausted, leading to a UN-mediated ceasefire (Resolution 598), without any formal resolution of territorial or political disputes.

Structural and Regional Transformations

The Iran-Iraq war fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Middle East. Despite initial perceptions of strength, Iraq emerged militarily weakened, revealing limitations in state capacity and strategic planning. Iran, although retaining its



territorial integrity, experienced significant depletion of human and material resources. The war reinforced the notion of the Gulf region as a strategically fragile zone, heavily influenced by external powers, particularly the U.S. and the Soviet Union. These interventions reinforced external involvement in regional security, laying the groundwork for the Gulf Wars of the 1990s. Internally, the war reshaped the political landscape of both states. In Iraq, the regime of Saddam Hussein intensified its authoritarian control, leveraging the war to suppress political dissent and strengthen internal security apparatuses. The Ba'athist narratives of national unity and anti-Iranian sentiment became central to domestic legitimacy. Similarly, in Iran, the Islamic Republic consolidated power through the war effort, promoting the ideology of martyrdom and framing the conflict as a defence of the revolution. For Tehran, the experience of facing an enemy supported by both superpowers, while being subjected to international isolation, fostered a permanent siege mentality. This reinforced a national security doctrine based on strategic self-reliance and a deep-seated suspicion of external powers, which continues to shape Persian Gulf politics today.

Moreover, the conflict caused severe economic disruptions, as both nations suffered significant destruction of infrastructure, particularly in oil production and transportation networks, undermining their long-term development. Iraq accumulated massive foreign debt from both Gulf and Western states, contributing to its economic fragility and subsequent invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Iran's heavily war-focused economy endured inflation, resource diversion, and labour shortages, shaping post-war reconstruction priorities and affecting domestic political dynamics.

The Iran-Iraq war also intensified sectarian and ethnic tensions within and across borders. In Iraq, policies of repression against Kurdish and Shi'a populations escalated, with the Anfal campaign resulting in mass killings and forced displacement. In Iran, the conflict reinforced a unifying Shi'a revolutionary identity, while marginalizing opposition voices. Regionally, the war's sectarian hues influenced subsequent conflicts, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the U.S., and shaped dynamics in the Gulf region, as Sunni and Shi'a divisions became more pronounced.

The war's unprecedented scale also marked a turning point in regional military practices, introducing new forms of warfare that would go on to shape subsequent conflicts, as the conduct of modern warfare shifted toward asymmetric and unconventional strategies. Iran's reliance on militia mobilisation and human wave tactics, as well as Iraq's use of chemical warfare and missile deployment, marked a broader erosion of normative and operational constraints in interstate conflict. This transformation altered immediate combat dynamics and redefined strategic expectations within the region, driving other states to reconsider the utility of unconventional capabilities. In the long term, these developments contributed to the normalization of previously limited forms of violence and influenced debates surrounding the regulation of chemical weapons and the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The war with Iraq also changed the deterrence strategy of the Islamic Republic. The two new main tools of this strategy were the missile program and the "Axis of Resistance," meaning cooperation with states (such as Syria), and armed non-state actors in the region. The core objective was to be able to threaten the adversary from a distance.

Finally, the conflict's long-term geopolitical impact includes the entrenchment of instability in the Gulf, creating a precedent for



protracted regional wars that draw in external powers, while undermining the capability for interstate trust. Both Iraq and Iran emerged as militarised and economically burdened states, constrained in the ability to project power effectively, while leaving neighbouring states to recalibrate alliances and security strategies. In this context, the war also reinforced the interdependence of oil politics and security concerns, as both states increasingly targeted energy infrastructure and relied on oil revenues to sustain prolonged military engagement, a dynamic that continues to shape Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Conclusion

The Iran-Iraq war proved to be more than a conventional territorial dispute; it was a transformative event that reshaped political, social and strategic paradigms across the Middle East. While the immediate battlefield outcomes were inconclusive, the structural consequences, ranging from the consolidation of authoritarian regimes, sectarian polarization, economic strain and strategic militarization, have had enduring effects. Understanding these consequences provides essential context surrounding subsequent conflicts and illuminates the long shadow cast by protracted warfare on regional stability, even in the absence of a decisive victory.



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GULF WAR

The First War of the Unipolar Era



Ilias Tasopoulos

Unlike previous systemic transitions, the Cold War ended without a direct great power confrontation, concluding instead through a largely peaceful process of political and institutional collapse. Yet, almost immediately, the emerging international order was tested, as 1991 marked the first major military conflict of the post–Cold War era.

WHILE THE WORLD WAS PREPARING for a world without a second superpower, Saddam Hussein attempted to expand the Iraqi territory by annexing Kuwait, seeking economic resources and political dominance in the Gulf. Baghdad declared Kuwait its “19th province” aiming to incorporate its territory, financial assets, and, critically, its vast oil reserves into the Iraqi state.¹ Had Iraq succeeded in consolidating this expansion, the regional balance of power in the Gulf would likely have shifted decisively in its favor. This would have dramatically increased Iraq’s share of global oil production and revenue, providing the material basis for sustained military and political expansion.

In addition, Iraq’s large, battle-hardened army, emerging from the Iran-Iraq War, would have been in a position to threaten or potentially invade Saudi territory, especially its oil-rich Eastern Province.² Beyond direct military implications, Iraq would also have gained disproportionate influence within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. By controlling both Iraqi and Kuwaiti production, and potentially coercing other Gulf producers, it could have shaped oil output and pricing decisions to its advantage. This would have had systemic consequences, giving Iraq not only regional dominance, but also global economic leverage over energy markets. The emergence of Iraq as a regional hegemon would have fundamentally altered the structure of the Middle East, replacing a fragmented system with one centered on a single, militarized power capable of projecting influence well beyond its immediate neighborhood.³

Eventually, the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq served both to enforce international norms of externally guaranteed territorial sovereignty and to preserve a regional balance favorable to outside powers. George H.W. Bush called it a ‘new world order’, a phrase heavy with promise, yet in retrospect, it was more a declaration of unipolarity’s hard logic than an accurate description.

Nor was the intervention itself novel.⁴ The long-standing tendency of great powers to prevent the emergence of autonomous regional hegemons in strategically vital areas was activated.⁵ Yet, at first, U.S. officials were divided and uncertain; intervention was not an automatic or predetermined outcome.⁶

Washington faced the structural challenge of translating its material superiority into recognized authority within the emerging unipolar system. This created a strategic necessity to demonstrate credible military primacy at the very outset of the post-Cold War era.

Eventually, the Gulf War reaffirmed the entire territorial architecture of the Middle East as drawn by Western powers in the aftermath of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, stating that borders would not be changed, at least not by conquest. Iraq had challenged that order by attempting to redraw borders by force, seeking to overturn a system in which states like Kuwait existed as separate, sov-



foreign entities.⁷ The existing state system was defended as the legitimate and permanent framework of regional order. The war confirmed the onset of American unipolarity after the Cold War, strengthened the permanent Western military presence in the Gulf, and reinforced a system in which local states remained dependent on external security guarantees.

The war also provided a controlled environment in which the U.S. could signal both capability and resolve, not only to regional actors in the Middle East but to the wider international system. The conduct of the campaign was therefore not only operationally effective but also communicative in intent. Through the extensive use of precision-strike capabilities, the U.S. showcased its ability to neutralize critical targets with speed and accuracy, minimizing costs while maximizing strategic effect. Simultaneously, the establishment of overwhelming air supremacy and the execution of a highly coordinated, integrated air campaign revealed a level of technological and organizational sophistication that few, if any, potential adversaries could match. Together, these elements illustrated that American power was preponderant in material terms and could shape outcomes in the new international order.

The U.S. also used the Gulf War to consolidate a broad and diverse coalition, extending beyond traditional allies to include European partners and even states that might otherwise have remained neutral or skeptical. Central to this effort was securing consent through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), where a series of resolutions authorized collective action against Iraq. This multilateral framework provided legal and political legitimacy, allowing the U.S. to frame the war as the enforcement of international norms with global backing.

This process effectively aligned key European powers, as well as other international actors, behind a common position, reducing the risk of great power fragmentation at a critical moment in the transition to the post-Cold War order. Even states with differing strategic interests were incorporated into the coalition through diplomatic bargaining, signaling that the U.S. could also operate through institutional consensus-building. For the first time in decades, Arab states had turned against a fellow Arab state, joining a Western-led coalition to oppose Iraq's aggression.

The U.S. and its partners provided tangible political and economic benefits to those who supported the intervention. These included financial assistance, debt relief, security guarantees, and strengthened bilateral relations. For example, frontline states and coalition contributors received economic aid and military support, while others benefited from improved diplomatic standing and closer integration into Western-led security frameworks.⁸

Crucially, the U.S. also secured the acquiescence of both Russia and China in the UNSC, which was essential for constructing a global consensus around the intervention. In the case of Russia (then the Soviet Union in its final phase), consent was achieved through a combination of structural weakness and strategic alignment. Beijing, for its part, sought to avoid further confrontation with the U.S. and other major powers and chose to abstain on key UNSC resolutions, thereby allowing them to pass without exercising its veto. The outcome was a rare convergence that enhanced the legitimacy of the intervention and reinforced the image of a coordinated great power response.

This configuration marked a clear departure from the logic of the Cold War, when great power rivalry was typically expressed



through proxy wars across regional subsystems, often producing prolonged instability and fragmented conflict dynamics. In contrast, the Gulf War suggested the emergence of a different pattern, ostensibly establishing the perception of U.S. leadership in an emerging international system.

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OPENING

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THE LEGACY OF THE



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2003 WAR ON IRAQ

Artemis Papadaki

The beginning of the 21st century was shaped by the September 11 attacks and the subsequent Iraq War. The U.S.-led Operation Iraqi Freedom triggered large-scale violence, and mass displacement, while policies such as de-Baathification weakened state institutions, intensifying sectarian divisions and enabling insurgency. Beyond Iraq, the conflict reshaped regional power balances, strengthened Iran's influence, and expanded the role of non-state actors, sectarian militias, and private military companies.



The Downfall of Operation Iraqi Freedom

THE FALL OF THE IRAQI REGIME came in a heartbeat, yet its consequences are still felt across the region, as the state collapsed completely and chaos followed in its aftermath. March 19, 2003, marked the start of the bombing campaign of “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” Less than two months later, by May 1, 2003, the Iraqi state was on the verge of collapse, and “Mission Accomplished” was declared. There are essentially two factors that explain the rapid fall of Baghdad on April 9: the technological superiority of the U.S., combined with the Iraqi regime’s lack of broad social support.

The period that followed was characterized by the so-called de-Baathification of the state, namely the complete disintegration of the Baathist party which had ruled Iraq for 35 years. In practice, this translated into the removal of all members of the Baathist party from the public administration and the security forces. To control the headless state, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was established by the United States as the temporary governing body to run Iraq’s transitional period. The first order, issued by Paul Bremer, the first Chief Executive of the CPA, resulted in the dismissal of an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 public-sector employees.¹ In the absence of state structures, unemployment and unrest swept across the country. Former soldiers, police officers, and other members of the Ba’ath Party began joining the insurgent groups that were already forming in Iraq.

The rapid onset of political violence led to an insurgency in the summer of 2003, starting in Baghdad’s Sunni triangle.² From the first parliamentary elections in 2005, the dominance of Shi’a parties was established, leading to further Sunni disillusionment. The 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari Shi’a holy site in Samarra triggered widespread Sunni-Shi’a violence, fanning the flames of the already ongoing sectarian tensions.³ For the first time in years, Sunnis were marginalized, Shi’as dominated parliament, while the Kurds in the north consolidated their autonomous region, strengthening the political and military foundations for their next major step toward greater autonomy.

During the presidency of Barack Obama, the U.S. military presence dropped to a small fraction of its peak levels of 2005-2007 (roughly 10 percent). The withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011 left the state of Iraq unable to manage its operations, increasingly unstable and nonfunctional.⁴

From Iraq to the region

The impact of the Iraq War was felt both within Iraq and beyond its borders. Most notably, Iraq ceased to function as a counterweight to Iran, and non-state actors and proxy wars became deeply rooted in the regional order. Meanwhile, Iraqi Kurdistan consolidated its autonomy, and jihadist movements rapidly gained influence throughout the region.

Iraq’s historical role as a balancing power vis-à-vis Iran since 1979 and the Iraq-Iran War of 1980-88 was nullified. Following the subsequent restructuring of Iraq’s political system, opportunities emerged for the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq and the Gulf. The cold war-like rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the absence of Iraq, soon took the form of proxy conflicts across the region. This pattern became particularly evident in the 2011 Syrian Civil War and the Saudi intervention in Yemen in 2015. Iran, a



long-standing supporter of the Assad regime, emerged as its principal backer alongside Russia. This support was counterbalanced by Saudi Arabia's material and political backing of Sunni opposition factions seeking to overthrow the Assad regime. The growing Iranian influence in the region also spread to Yemen, when the Iranian-backed Houthis seized Sana'a and overthrew Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's government, convincing Saudi Arabia to intervene in 2015.

The collapse of Iraqi state structures increased the role of non-state actors as key drivers of conflict, including jihadist ones. They promised a new wave of armed resistance that would expel the Americans from Iraq and the region and spread their extreme and violent form of Islam. Key in this regard was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He would become one of the region's most notorious jihadists after the circulation across international media of a video showing the beheading of an American contractor. Zarqawi's practices, most notably small-unit tactics and decentralized tactical leadership, were to be the base of the Al-Qaeda and Islamic State practices in the region in the years to come.⁵

At the same time, Iraqi Kurdistan served as a symbolic model of political aspiration for the Kurds in the region. The Syrian Civil War enabled Syrian Kurds to establish de facto self-rule in parts of northern Syria and together with the expanding influence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), intensified Turkish security concerns. The re-empowered separatist Kurdish efforts in Iraq and Syria also raised Turkish concerns about the possible emergence of a similar movement within its borders and triggered operations like "Peace Spring" (2019) along the Syrian-Turkish and Iraqi-Turkish borders.⁶ This led to the emergence of Turkey as a key regional actor.

The US intervention in Iraq had wider implications for the international order. The U.S. failed to adapt or even understand the power dynamics of asymmetric warfare, while losing the legitimacy battle at home and abroad. Despite Secretary of State Colin Powell's efforts to convince the international community of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, in violation of the UN Charter, the U.S. breached international law by launching its invasion.⁷ On the ground, its heavy reliance on private military companies increased war costs and operational complexity, while also leading to major international law violations and economic scandals. It is

estimated that up to 180,000 contractors were deployed from private military and security companies (PMSCs), such as Blackwater. Accusations of serious misconduct, including fraud, human rights violations, torture and war crimes, were not long in coming.⁸ In April 2004, photos and videos documenting the extent of abuse of Iraqi prisoners detained by the U.S. at Abu Ghraib prison hit the news, while the publication of the first WikiLeaks archives and videos in 2010 further tarnished the U.S. image around the world.⁹

As international humanitarian law was violated and the



U.S. image came crashing, the entire region was suffering greatly. The miscalculated consequences of the dismantling of a foreign state created the ideal conditions for the proliferation of armed groups, sectarian militias, and jihadists on Iraqi soil. Ultimately, the war's long-term repercussions are reflected in the wider region, in the Syrian civil war, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, as well as in the ongoing conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

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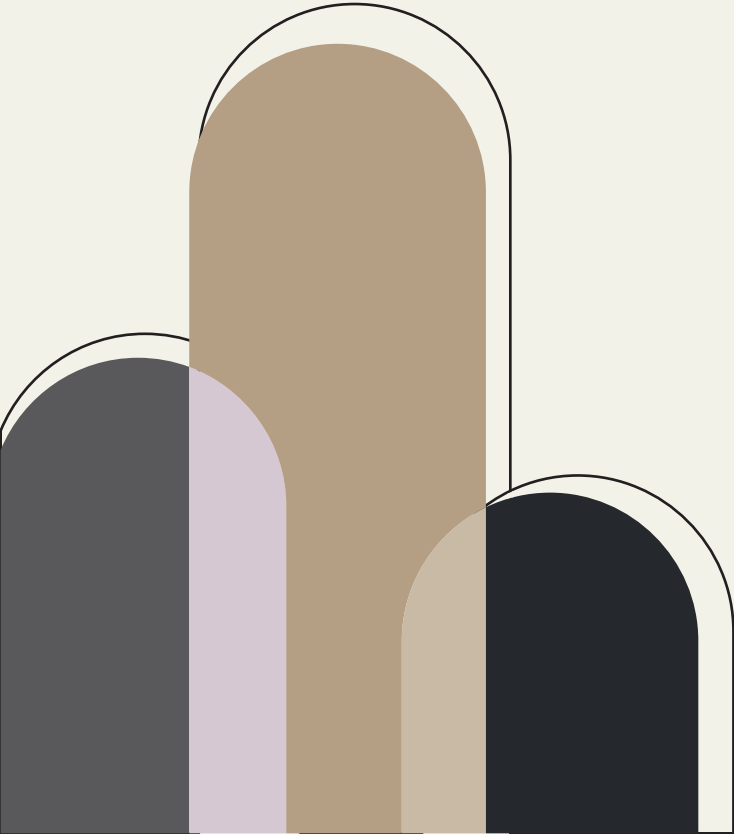
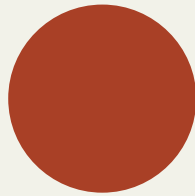
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THE 2006 LEBANON WAR

HYBRID WARFARE AND THE SHAPING OF REGIONAL ALLIANCES IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Eirini Giannopoulou

The 2006 Lebanon war was a turning point for asymmetrical warfare and regional power dynamics in the Middle East. Hezbollah's performance in the war reshaped perceptions of the capabilities of non-state armed actors, strengthened the Iran-led Axis of Resistance and facilitated rapprochement between the Gulf monarchies and Israel.

Timeline of events: from the Cedar Revolution to the Dahiya Doctrine

AFTER NEARLY TWENTY YEARS OF OCCUPATION, Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000. Hezbollah claimed that the Israeli withdrawal was incomplete.¹ That argument was based on the fact that Israeli forces maintained their presence in the Shebaa Farms, a territory historically disputed between Israel and Lebanon. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in Beirut, believed to have been carried out under Syrian orders, was followed by enormous outcry inside and outside Lebanon. The country went into a period of further instability and intensified sectarianism, which resulted in the Cedar Revolution. The Lebanese people demanded lasting political independence from Syrian influence in domestic affairs, forcing the Syrian military and intelligence services to withdraw from Lebanon in 2005.

While Syria, one of the key supporters of Hezbollah, withdrew from Lebanese domestic affairs, demands for the disarmament of Hezbollah were increasing. It was crucial for Hezbollah to demonstrate that its military apparatus was still relevant, as the threat from Israel persisted. On 12 June 2006, the group raided border areas, killing three and capturing two Israeli soldiers. Following this, Israel launched a full attack against Lebanon, not constraining its response solely to Hezbollah targets, but targeting the country as a whole. The implications of this 34-day-long series of attacks were detrimental for the Lebanese civilian population. International criticism of Israeli military actions was severe, as Israel was accused of violating Article 51 of the Geneva Convention.² It was accused of using disproportionate force against civilians (i.e. 35,000 cluster bombs) and of the destruction of civilian infrastructure. This tactic was implemented across Lebanon, especially in the Dahiya suburb of Beirut, where Hezbollah had established its predominance, creating a military precedent, referred to as the Dahiya Doctrine.³ Through the Dahiya Doctrine, Israel aimed for a deeper and more structural delegitimization of Hezbollah across the Lebanese population, strengthening the narrative that the non-state actor was responsible for leading the country into war.⁴ On the other hand, Israel suffered 160 casualties of military personnel, a number that is considered high, given its military and defence capacity.

The significance of hybrid asymmetrical warfare

For former Lebanese Army General, Hanna, "*Hezbollah wins if it does not lose and Israel loses if it does not win. What is more important to the non-state actor is survival than to achieve victory*".⁵ It was key for Hezbollah's reputation to prove that it was capable of defending Lebanon against Israeli attacks, a core component of its identity. To do so, Hezbollah deployed a mix of conventional weapons and irregular tactics in the battlespace to achieve political goals. As one of the first insurgent groups to employ such blended tactics, ranging from guerrilla-like hit-and-run operations and conventional missiles to information warfare, Hezbollah led the 2006 war to become a classic example of "hybrid warfare".⁶ Hezbollah's strategy included a combination of guerrilla tactics, advanced weaponry, as well as media propaganda. Besides familiarisation with irregular warfare and high military technologies, hybrid warfare entails shaping public perceptions and morale.⁷

More specifically, along with physical violence, information warfare is a key component of hybrid warfare, diffusing battlespace



events into the cognitive space, as groups aim to gain an advantage over their adversaries beyond the physical realm. Characteristically, Hezbollah has used the mantra “*if you haven't captured it on film you haven't fought*”.⁸ This rationale aims to both advance recruitment and reinforce the intergenerational relevance of Hezbollah's actions and ideology.

Hezbollah's success in negating war objectives, highlighted that non-state guerrilla forces can absorb mass attacks within an asymmetric conflict, exposing vulnerabilities of the Israeli army and pushing the latter to reconsider its tactics.⁹

Shaping regional alliances

The war's long-term consequences far exceeded the battlefield and became a catalyst for shifting power dynamics in the Middle East. The aforementioned success of Hezbollah in surviving Israeli attacks boosted its popularity across the Arab world, crystallizing regional coalitions. Externalizing its power, Hezbollah (re)established itself as an integral part of an anti-Western coalition in the Middle East. The outcomes of the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003 and the perceived success of Hezbollah in the 2006 conflict strengthened the Axis of Resistance and situated the latter at the center of regional power dynamics. It boosted, both morally and practically, the Iran-led alliance of states, such as Assad-led Syria, and non-state actors, such as Hamas in Palestine and the Houthis in Yemen.¹⁰

Along with Hezbollah's reputation, the leverage of non-state actors across the region grew, such as those in Palestine, Yemen and Syria, along with jihadist factions. In the following years, non-state actors would become key players in the reshaping of power structures and in challenging state authority. Iran's prestige grew as well. The Islamic Republic's ability to provide support to non-state armed actors was evident. Moreover, Iran validated its strategy of creating armed proxy networks, rather than solely relying on traditional state power, thus establishing the significance of asymmetrical warfare in contemporary military affairs. At the same time, the United States' “new Middle East” project, which had been eroded after the developments in Iraq, further lost legitimacy across the region. This, along with Iran's (and the Axis of Resistance's) growing influence and the perceived capability of Hezbollah to fight back against Israel, generated anxiety amongst the Gulf monarchies. It can be argued that the war accelerated Gulf-Israel normalization, with the containment of Iran being a common imperative.¹¹



To conclude, the war had two main consequences for the Middle East and beyond. Firstly, it shaped hybrid warfare tactics and established non-state armed actors as capable antagonists to hard state power and intricate technologies. Secondly, it solidified Iran as a point of reference for alliance creation and foreign policy prioritization. The overarching consequence of the war was the disproportionate use of violence against civilians and vital infrastructure, further trapping Lebanon in a cycle of violence, poverty and post-conflict reconstruction that continues to this day.



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