

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES 2

THE EMERGING REGIONAL SECURITY  
ARCHITECTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST  
AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

MICHAEL HARARI

*OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES 2: The Emerging Regional Security*  
*Michael Harari*

**Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)**

Hausmanns gate 7  
PO Box 9229 Oslo  
NO-0134 OSLO, Norway  
Tel. +47 22 54 77 00  
Fax. +47 22 54 77 01  
Web: [www.prio.no](http://www.prio.no)



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**Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Foundation)**

20, Stasandrou, Apt. 401  
CY 1060 Nicosia  
Tel. +357 22 377336  
Website: [www.fescyprus.org](http://www.fescyprus.org)



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# THE EMERGING REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

M I C H A E L H A R A R I

## Key points

- To a great extent, the Syrian crisis reflects the regional security architecture of the Middle East: the ever-increasing dominance of Iran and Russia, the strengthening of Assad's rule, and the increasing concern in the US and the Sunni countries regarding Iran's mounting status. These will continue to characterize the predicted struggle in the near future.
- Russia's return to playing a more vital role in the region boosts its status; however, this also involves formidable challenges. Success of the political process in Syria and relations with Washington will clarify the direction in which Moscow will be heading.

In recent years, and particularly since the Arab Spring, the Middle East has experienced dramatic change and turmoil. In turn, these created crises which affected the entire region and beyond (incessant fighting in Syria, the refugee crisis in Europe), as well as the status of the key countries (e.g. Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia). International intervention in these processes also underwent profound change, based on the weight and depth of the intervention of Great Powers, such as the US and Russia. This analysis seeks to assess the present status of the main players and attempts to identify the seeming directions of regional developments.

From the point of view of the US, its current policy in the Middle East is, in fact, to support a trend that began in the last years of the Obama administration. The US government concentrated its efforts and policy-making on the war against ISIS, and de facto complied with assertive Russian intervention in Syria. Nonetheless, the Trump administration intensified this line and at the same time demonstrated greater ease vis-à-vis collaboration

with Russia, which included closer coordination in their attempts to stabilize a ceasefire in several areas in Syria. This suggests that the US administration accepts, perhaps for lack of any other alternative, Assad's rule in Syria. After all, Russian intervention, coupled with close assistance on the part of Iran and Hezbollah, heightened his ability to exist, and later even broadened the compass of his regime.

American-Russian coordination is not devoid of problems. Washington endeavors to bar Iran's influence over developments in Syria: in the immediate term, on the subject of southern Syria, thus also addressing the fears of Israel and Jordan; and in the long term, regarding a political process that will secure the situation in Syria. The feeling is that the decline in American assertiveness projects on the extent of Russia's influence and on the policy of adjacent countries, such as Turkey. However, close coordination with Saudi Arabia, Israel and Jordan, remains intact. Furthermore, domestic problems in Washington affect US room for maneuver vis-à-vis Russia, as well as other arenas, and in the context of the present analysis, its apparent determination concerning its behavior in the Middle East; North Korea is one more case. OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES 2: The Emerging Regional Security Michael Harari 3 Russia well steered international and regional circumstances to increase intervention in the Middle East. Its involvement in 2015, designed to prevent the collapse of Assad's regime, was successful, and international efforts, particularly those of the US, on the war against ISIS worked well in this context. In general terms, Moscow should be pleased with the reinforcement of Assad's regime and the advanced implementation of ceasefire in specific areas in Syria, as well as with its actions regarding other players in the area, such as Iran and Turkey on the one hand, and Israel and Jordan on the other, notwithstanding the fact that the latter relies on Washington to safeguard their vital interests.

Despite the de facto reinforcement of its status in the Middle East, there is a difficulty involved in making inroads in the political process in Syria. This depends on the way in which it will fall in line with Russian interests and continue to reflect success that will enable Moscow to translate the message "the return of Russia to the Middle East" in a way that would serve its "super power" status, as well as its economic interests (arms sales, energy and more). It is worthy of note that the current relative success is not free of risk for Russia: Washington has distanced itself from the region, and Russia's establishment as the influential and leading player in the Syrian crisis carries daunting challenges as well. The

failure of the political crisis in Syria may cause Russia to be drawn into more direct intervention, which may evoke episodes from the past.

On a broader level, the internal problems of the current US administration worsen the possibility of promoting what seems as a promising potential for improving relations between the United States and Russia in a way that would also have positive implications on other issues (such as the Ukraine). On the other hand, Europe leaves the political leadership to Moscow and Washington, and on a practical level accepts the direction which the developments in Syria lead to – underpinning Assad’s rule. Moreover, Europe’s success in significantly blocking immigrants in the region (e.g. in Libya), enabled it to zero in on domestic challenges, such as Brexit, and the weighty elections in Germany.

Iran, post the nuclear agreement, enjoys a sense of satisfaction, which is not devoid of problems or challenges. The Trump administration, constantly repeating its anti-Iranian policy and intimating since taking office its intention to annul the agreement, is now concentrating on efforts to control Iran’s increasing regional influence. On the domestic front, the Iranian elections were largely successful, both for the elected president (for a second term of office) and mainly from the point of view of the overall leader. The formation of a new government attests to the fact that President Rouhani well understands his room for maneuver. He seeks to advance the economic situation, while being careful not to over-alienate the conservative camp.

The main concern of the regional and international stage focuses on Iran’s assertive foreign policy and the expansion of its influence in the area. Iran demonstrates achievements on several fronts: Syria, where it well secured (albeit, with Russian aid) Assad’s regime, is perceived by the Russians as a most vital player for guaranteeing its interests. Lebanon, where Iran’s rule over Hezbollah enables it to dispatch the organization to the crucial battlefield in Syria, and doubtlessly plays a main role in the internal-Lebanese political process. And Yemen, where, even if there is no clear-cut decision, Iran managed to block the ambitious Saudi attempt in the country, which reflects on additional arenas. The bottom line is that it appears that Iran is using the “leadership vacuum” that has been created in the region. This is also true of the crisis between the Persian Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, regarding Qatar. Nonetheless, they OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES 2: The Emerging Regional Security Michael Harari 4 perceive several challenges that stem from surprises that may be

created mainly by players such as the US and Israel, and doubtlessly developments in the relevant war zones.

Turkey views regional developments, and particularly those that are adjacent to its borders, like Syria, with a great deal of concern. Ankara has indeed managed to become part of the vital triangle of Syria: Russia – Iran – Turkey. However, it seems that the first two actors play a more dominant role. On the one hand, its poor relations with Washington, despite the hopes that President Trump aroused, and on the other its unsatisfactory relations with the main Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia (after Ankara decided to support Qatar) and Egypt, do not permit Turkey to play a major role in shaping the area. As expected, Ankara attaches great importance to the Kurdish angle, with special emphasis placed on Syria, but naturally also factors beyond this angle. However, this does not always enable the country to play a more central role, as it might have. Moreover, Erdogan's focus on the domestic arena, even after promising the legislative changes which he wanted, and his adoption of a heavy hand with his opponents (or those whom he identifies as such) did not help him vis-à-vis the EU and the major countries in Europe and in particular Germany. In general, we may see a shift to the east, both toward the Middle East and Russia, at the expense of one to the west, the US, NATO and Europe.

Recently, Saudi Arabia adopted a pro-active policy, on both the domestic and international fronts. This is the result of the dramatic changes that have taken place in the post Arab Spring, and the absence of "traditional leaders" in the Arab world. Changes in the top echelons of the Saudi leadership, and the appointment of the present heir to the throne, have also led to a more assertive policy that was uncharacteristic of Riyadh in recent decades. Saudi foreign policy is characterized by a clear-cut anti-Iranian line, which springs from the fear of the reinforcement of Iran in the region, particularly after the nuclear agreement. At this time, it is difficult to point to apparent achievements in the relevant arenas – Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon. However, it is obvious that its leadership, which is most naturally accepted on the Arab stage, and the more favorable relationship with the Trump administration, have boosted its status, offering more suitable room for maneuver. Real changes can be expected on the domestic scene. The new heir to the throne has been intimating his intention to engender significant reforms, mainly on the economic front, with the objective of positioning the kingdom on economic and political firm ground. Many

questions still encompass his ambitious vision, and the main question remains – will these also be accompanied by political reform?

Egypt for its part, is – still – coping with the upheavals and impact of the Arab Spring. President el-Sisi has secured his government; however, he is coping with a taxing economic situation. With the Trump administration, his relations with Washington have relatively improved, and it appears that Europe can also recognize, espousing the Egyptian perception, the importance of economic aid that will help domestic stabilization, which will in turn contribute to regional stability. Its relations with the Persian Gulf states, mainly with Saudi Arabia, which have experienced ups and downs, have settled down, and this is an important development since economic aid from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states is vital for Egypt. On the regional-political scene, Egypt has exhibited more activity. On its near Palestinian front - the Gaza Strip – it managed to somewhat restrain the Hamas by exploiting the Strip's destitution, together with the assistance of Mohammad Dahlan, who enjoys Egypt's trust. The close dialogue with Israel also helped. In the Syrian context, Egypt has recently adopted a more assertive policy that favors the unity of Syria and – implicitly – preservation of the Assad regime, in view of OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES 2: The Emerging Regional Security Michael Harari 5 other alternatives. It appears that Cairo has succeeded, and in this sense has won the attentive ear of Riyadh, as well as that of Moscow. In recent years, Israel has been enjoying a more opportune strategic environment. The peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan are sturdy, and the level of trust of the leaderships of both countries is favorable. Fear of the increasing power of Iran has generated mutual points of interest with the main Sunni countries, enabling a more favorable room for maneuver vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis. Absence of any noteworthy political process with the Palestinians has not deteriorated into a violent crisis, despite the fact that questions regarding the future process are becoming more profound. The challenge with Iran still exists, with emphasis on Syria's presence and status in the near and distant future. Where is the Middle East heading? It is too early to evaluate whether it faces stability. Developments in Syria, with emphasis on the overthrow of ISIS, and a more significant political process, may provide initial direction. In any event, two main platforms will dictate development in the near future: the regional and international attempt to check the growing influence of Iran on the region – without impairing the nuclear agreement; and the return of Russia to play a central role in the area.

*Michael Harari worked for a private bank in Israel before joining the Diplomatic Service (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel) in 1986. He served at the Israeli Embassy in Cairo as Spokesman; Political Counselor at the Embassy in London; and Ambassador to Cyprus for five years (2010-2015). At the MFA in Jerusalem, he worked intensively on Middle Eastern and Strategic topics – covering Palestinian and Jordanian affairs at the Center for Political Research; being in charge of the whole Middle East and the Peace Process affair at the Bureau of policy planning; writing policy recommendations for the government; and heading the International Division at the Center for Political Research for two years. Educated at Tel Aviv and Haifa Universities, he holds BA and MA degrees in Political Science and Defense Studies. He also studied at the National Defense College of IDF. Mr. Harari retired from the MFA in 2017, after 31 years at the Diplomatic Service. He currently teaches at University in Israel, and does consulting on strategic topics, policy planning and energy.*