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Research Report

Normalisation and Realignment in the Middle East: A new, conflict-prone regional order takes shape

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SWP Comment

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Normalisation and Realignment in the Middle East

A New, Conflict-Prone Regional Order Takes Shape

Muriel Asseburg and Sarah Ch. Henkel

Between 2020 and 2021, Israel concluded normalisation agreements with four Arab states. They were celebrated internationally as a breakthrough. Meanwhile, since 2018, and largely unnoticed by the public, Arab states have started repairing their relations with Syria. Finally, in January 2021, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ended their boycott of Qatar during the meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia. Changing assessments of the regional security situation and converging interests have enabled these rapprochements. However, these developments do not mean that the region is moving towards peace and stability; on the contrary, long-lasting conflicts remain unresolved and the threat perceptions of third actors are being exacerbated. Germany and its partners in the EU should avoid being co-opted by local and regional conflicting parties and should instead focus on supporting regional conflict management.

Several rapprochements are currently taking place between countries in the conflict-torn Middle East. They are decisively driven by the Arab Gulf States, especially the UAE, and are largely a symptom of the regional power shifts emerging from the so-called Arab Spring. Another contributing factor can be seen in the fickle nature of the US's Middle East policy as its focus increasingly shifts away from the region.

Israeli-Arab Normalisation

On 15 September 2020, Israel and the UAE, as well as Bahrain, agreed to normalise

their relations by signing the so-called Abraham Accords. Israel also concluded agreements with Morocco and Sudan on 22 December 2020 and 6 January 2021, respectively. All four agreements stipulate mutual recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations.

However, the depth of the relationships envisaged in the individual agreements varies significantly. Israel's agreements with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco build upon the Israeli-Arab normalisation of the 1990s, which was made possible by the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At the time, this rapprochement facilitated trade



and tourism between Israel and a number of Gulf and Maghreb states, albeit to varying degrees, and enabled the establishment of bilateral diplomatic or trade representations. Yet, these relations suffered massive setbacks as a result of the Second Intifada from 2000 to 2005.

Today's rapprochements with the three states were possible because none of them had bilateral conflicts with Israel; nor had any of them ever been significantly involved in wars with Israel. Israel and the UAE had already developed close intelligence, military and civilian ties in recent years. With the agreement, these arrangements are now official, and attempts will be made to deepen and expand them to include a societal dimension. In view of the previous ties, these accords hardly qualify as "peace agreements" – as framed by then-US President Donald Trump – but rather a "coming out".

The agreement between Israel and Sudan should be judged differently, as the two countries had been in a state of war up until that point. Sudanese contingents fought in wars against Israel, and under Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019), Khartoum maintained close relations with opponents of Israel, especially Iran and Hamas. Israel had repeatedly attacked convoys in Sudan that were transporting weapons to Hamas. This agreement, therefore, is in fact a "peace agreement", albeit still awaiting implementation.

Transactional Agreements

The recent normalisations comprise prime examples of transactional agreements. The Trump administration played a crucial mediating role in their conclusion, placing Sudan under massive pressure and offering the UAE and Morocco additional incentives to sweeten the deal. After all, for all actors involved, interests, not the settlement of conflict, took centre stage. Apart from the convergence of the threat perceptions of Israel and the Arab states, it was the personal motives of Trump and Netanyahu, who were both in the middle of election

campaigns, and specific national interests that played the most prominent roles.

US President Trump sought to distinguish himself as a peacemaker in the Middle East, especially after his so-called "deal of the century" to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained unsuccessful after being put forward in January 2020. He also intended to mobilise regional support for his maximum pressure campaign against Iran and to strengthen the US economy through arms deals.

Israel prioritised closing the ranks against Iran, while also seeking to establish a new paradigm in which the Palestinian leadership would no longer have veto power over Israel's regional relations. In addition, Israel sought to broaden its economic relations and expand its presence in the Horn of Africa. The US's arms deliveries to Arab states were offset by its commitments to maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge.

The *UAE* was primarily interested in accessing modern weapons systems and establishing a long-term bond with the US through extensive arms cooperation. The Trump administration promised the UAE 50 F35 fighter jets and 18 reaper drones for their normalisation with Israel. In mid-January 2021, it also designated the UAE and Bahrain as major US security partners. In addition, the UAE was interested in improving its reputation following its controversial involvement in the Yemen war. Further, Abu Dhabi sought to diversify its economy and develop the country into a technology hub. The agreement between Israel and Bahrain, on the other hand, was not so much the result of specific Bahraini interests as it was a signal of Saudi support for closer cooperation between Bahrain and Israel, seeing that Manama has hardly any independent decision-making capacity vis-à-vis Riyadh.

Sudan, under de facto President Abdelfattah al-Burhan, had motives for the agreement that actually bore no relation to Israel at all. Rather, Washington had made Sudan's removal from its terror list and immunisation against lawsuits brought by

terror victims conditional upon Khartoum's normalisation of relations with Israel. This was crucial for the leadership in Khartoum, because it not only paved the way for the receipt of US developmental aid, but also helped Sudan rid itself of the tarnished image that had been left behind by the Bashir regime, thereby allowing it to regain access to international loans.

Morocco was incentivised by US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and the promise that negotiations on a settlement of the conflict there would take place on the basis of Morocco's autonomy plan. As a result, not only the US, but also the UAE, Bahrain and Jordan opened consulates in Western Sahara. In addition, the US promised to supply Morocco with drones and other precision weapons, as well as extensive aid and investment.

Problematic Side Effects

As a result of the agreement between Israel and the UAE, a large number of cooperative ventures have since been agreed upon, not only at the state level, but also between private and civil society actors. Thus, for the first time, a "warm peace" is emerging; already, Israel's relations with the UAE have clearly outpaced those with Egypt and Jordan. Israel's existence is not only being recognised as a reality, the country is also increasingly accepted as a partner and a part of the region.

However, this shift should not be confused with progress towards a settlement of the conflicts between Israel and its neighbours. In the context of the agreements, Israel did commit to the Gulf States and the US not to carry out the formal annexation of parts of the West Bank that it had announced in May 2020. However, the Abraham Accords make reference to the Trump plan, thus legitimising the Israeli right's claim to parts of the West Bank as well as permanent, overarching Israeli control over Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. They make no mention of a Palestinian state or concrete steps to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In this vein, the Arab "normalisers" cannot be expected to exert significant pressure on Israel to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Israel's bilateral conflicts with Syria and Lebanon. On the contrary, the UAE is even falling behind European positions on the matter, for example by failing to differentiate between Israel proper and Israeli settlements in occupied or annexed territories. Emirati companies have even concluded agreements with companies active in Israeli settlements. While Morocco criticises Israel's actions, including those that endanger the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, it is unlikely to use its political capital to actively counter Israel's occupation and annexation policies.

The Trump administration's stance, the Israeli-Moroccan agreement and the growing recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara have also led to both a hardening of Morocco's position on the Western Sahara issue and to increasing tensions between Morocco and Algeria. Algiers feels threatened by the (potential) expansion of Israeli-Moroccan cooperation and sees itself as even more isolated in the region, especially due to its support for the Polisario.

Beyond these direct effects, three factors in particular are likely to exacerbate conflict in the region. First, the Trump administration undermined principles of international law – above all the prohibition of the acquisition of territory by force – and this is made abundantly clear in its promises to Israel and Morocco. The second factor is the intensification of Tehran's threat perception as it fears "strategic encirclement". The US's commitments to deliver arms could thus trigger a new arms race in the region and prompt Iran to work to secure its strategic depth by expanding its network of (violent) non-state actors. Third, Israel's intelligence and IT cooperation with authoritarian states in the region threatens to further restrict the scope of action of opposition and civil society actors in these states rather than promoting more inclusive political systems. As recent reports about the Israeli NSO Group's spyware "Pegasus"

confirm, the UAE's leadership features as one of the malware's clients, employing it for the surveillance of journalists, human rights activists, and even members of the Emirates' royal families.

Rapprochement of Arab States with Syria

Since the end of 2018, several Arab states have gradually been normalising their relations with Damascus. In the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, a majority of Arab leaders condemned Assad's actions against his own population and suspended Syria's membership in the Arab League. Some Arab Gulf States (above all Qatar and Saudi Arabia) supported the Syrian opposition and rebel groups. Yet at no point during the civil war was Syria wholly isolated in the region. Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Oman never completely severed ties with Damascus. The UAE maintained both economic and diplomatic channels with Damascus and harboured several members of the Assad family.

The UAE and Bahrain set Syria's rehabilitation into motion by reopening their embassies in Damascus in December 2018. In the run-up to the Arab League meeting in March 2019, other Arab states, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia, (unsuccessfully) lobbied for Syria's readmission to the organisation. At that point, only Qatar and Saudi Arabia explicitly rejected Syria's return. US and EU pressure was most likely the main impediment to Syria's re-admission.

In October 2020, Oman reinstated its ambassador to Damascus. In December 2020, high-ranking representatives of the Syrian regime met with Israeli security officials at the Russian military base Hmeimim. Finally, in early May 2021, a Saudi delegation led by intelligence chief General Khaled Humaidan visited Damascus. Both meetings are said to have discussed the conditions for a regional rehabilitation of the Assad regime.

Authoritarian Consolidation

Nothing has changed with regard to the reasoning behind Syria's original exclusion from the Arab League, namely its massive human rights violations and alleged war crimes. Nonetheless, Arab states now assess the situation differently in light of various developments, including the military defeat of the Syrian opposition, the increased influence of non-Arab powers in Syria, and the devastating regional destabilisation emanating from the Syrian conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic. This shifting perception was also contributed to by the realisation that, at least since Russia's intervention in 2015, the US and the EU, despite their initial mobilisation against the Assad regime, were no longer seeking regime change in Damascus. As a result, the Arab Gulf States in particular favoured a reversion to authoritarian consolidation across the region, including in Syria.

The UAE justified its rapprochement with Damascus in December 2018 by highlighting the necessity to push back the influence of Iran and Turkey in Syria and to strengthen the Sunni Arab presence there. Both Iran and Turkey militarily intervened indirectly and directly on different sides in the conflict early on. Initiated by Russia in 2017, the Astana Process saw Tehran and Ankara assume official roles in the management of the Syrian conflict. Since then, their presence, or that of the militias they support, has been consolidated in various parts of the country. Indeed, Turkey has even administratively incorporated enclaves in northern Syria. For Abu Dhabi, the prospect of profiting from investment opportunities in the reconstruction of the war-torn country also plays a role. Before 2011, the UAE was the second largest Arab investor in Syria after Saudi Arabia, primarily in the real estate and transportation sectors. Since 2018, Abu Dhabi has been showing increased interest in investing in luxury projects such as Marota City.

For Syria's neighbours, it is above all economic interests that compel them to open up to Damascus. *Jordan* and *Lebanon*,

which have been severely impacted and destabilised by the civil war in Syria, seek to revive cross-border trade and profit by way of Syrian reconstruction. The Jordanian leadership also fears the transnational mobilisation of jihadist groups and is therefore interested in stabilising Syria and deepening its security cooperation with Damascus. Further, the interest in a swift repatriation of the more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees hosted by Jordan and Lebanon plays a central role in their respective rapprochements with the country.

The decisive obstacles for the Arab leaders' reengagement with Damascus are therefore political pressure from Washington and Brussels, and US sanctions. Besides the punitive measures levied against President Assad and his extended entourage, the US sanction regime includes sectoral sanctions that may also be applied to third country nationals who cooperate with Syria's financial institutions, oil and natural gas industries, and construction companies.

Assad's Rehabilitation

By gradually normalising their relations with Syria, Arab countries confer renewed regional legitimacy on the Assad regime. Behavioural changes in terms of respect for human rights, rule of law, inclusion and good governance, let alone a political transition and a power-sharing arrangement as envisaged in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of 2015, are no longer part of the discussion when it comes to Syria's return to the Arab League. As a result, the Syrian population will continue to suffer massive repression. The majority of displaced Syrians residing in neighbouring countries will likely be forced to return home in the medium-term, even if neither their safety nor livelihoods are guaranteed.

Limiting Iran's influence in Syria and expelling Tehran-backed militias has now become the Arab Gulf States' most pressing priority. Yet, President Assad depends on these militias to maintain his claim to power. Should the Arab states in fact try

to reduce Iran's footprint in Syria, this would probably lead to a renewed flare-up of armed conflict in areas controlled by the regime, thus making the stabilisation of Syria even more difficult.

Arab normalisation of relations with Damascus goes hand in hand with a de facto recognition of Russia as the new dominant foreign power in the Middle East, which means a further weakening of Western influence. Last but not least, the rehabilitation of Assad fits into the pattern of authoritarian restoration that can be observed in many other parts of the region. Assad's staying power and the regime's self-presentation as a secular bulwark against religious extremism are not only seen as constitutive of a model to be emulated by some rulers in the region, but they have also increasingly made an impression internationally.

Syria's return to the Arab League could thus also serve as a springboard for the country's leadership to reintegrate into the world community without any changes in behaviour or reform. In any case, the international rehabilitation of the Assad regime is incrementally progressing. This dynamic undermines the UN-led Geneva process, in which the parties to the conflict are negotiating a political settlement. Yet, that route is largely deadlocked anyway, and offers little prospect of success in view of the military balance of power and the Astana Process.

End of the Qatar Blockade

In January 2021, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt ended their boycott of Qatar after nearly four years. In June 2017, this so-called quartet had suspended diplomatic relations with Doha and imposed an air, land and sea blockade on the country. They demanded, among other things, that Qatar restrict its relations with Iran, close the Turkish military base that was recently established in Doha and stop supporting the Muslim Brotherhood.

Already in 2014, Qatar's divergent foreign and security policy priorities had led to a serious rift with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. Doha saw the Arab uprisings that began in 2011 as an opportunity to strengthen both its regional position as well as groups that it favoured. To this end, it supported, among others, the Muslim Brotherhood and its local offshoots. The leaderships in Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Manama and Riyadh, on the other hand, soon regarded the uprisings, and especially the Muslim Brotherhood's role therein, as an existential threat, and reverted to authoritarian restoration. Although the dispute ended in November 2014 with the signing of the "Riyadh Document", divergence remained. Again, in January 2021, the four countries lifted the embargo on Qatar even though Doha had not met any of their thirteen demands.

Motives for Closing Ranks

There were three main reasons for this *détente*. First, the lifting of the boycott, which was primarily initiated by Saudi Arabia, represented a concession to the new US administration. The Saudi royal family sought to improve its reputation and bilateral relations vis-à-vis the US in this way. During his presidential campaign, Joe Biden had already announced that he would withdraw all support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen and fundamentally reassess relations with the Gulf monarchy. This also came against the backdrop of the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, which was presumably ordered by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Second, by lifting the embargo, the quartet intended to integrate Qatar more strongly into its "Sunni-Arab alliance" and thus pull it away from the sphere of Iranian and Turkish influence. As the Biden administration sought to return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or to negotiate a new nuclear deal with Iran, the quartet feared a strengthening of Tehran which (in their eyes) necessitated defensive action. The heightened threat perception of

Iran in the four capitals combined with the realisation that Doha was (inevitably) cooperating more closely with Ankara and Tehran due to the boycott, contributed to the quartet's willingness to overlook Doha's deviating foreign policy in favour of closing the ranks.

Third, although less significant, the lifting of the boycott offered the prospect of economic recovery. March 2020's drop in oil prices on the international market as well as the decline in global demand for oil due to the Covid-19 pandemic, resulted in significant losses for the Gulf States. The end of the embargo allowed for the revitalisation of cross-border trade, mutual investment and open air travel. The fact that the boycott forced Qatar to diversify its economy has ironically made it a more attractive business partner for the other Gulf States. This also provides an opportunity for the deeper integration of their economies.

Limited Reconciliation

Still, the persistence of ideological divergences and conflicts of interest is likely to continue to cause tension among the GCC states as well as between Qatar and Egypt. Despite reconciliation, the GCC is still far from being an effective regional organisation, let alone a defensive alliance.

Conflict-prone New Order

The described normalisation processes and rapprochements reflect the power shifts of the last decade. They can be explained by countries' changing assessments of the regional security situation, shared threat perceptions and converging interests – especially, but not exclusively, of the Arab Gulf States and Israel.

The *power shifts* are primarily characterised by the rise of the small Gulf States, first and foremost the UAE, as the engines of regional development. They emerged invigorated from the geostrategic disruptions caused by the Arab Spring, while traditional regional powers (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi

Arabia and Syria) lost stability and importance. At the same time, the partial withdrawal of the US as the formerly dominant foreign power in the region widened the room for manoeuvre of emerging regional powers and non-state actors. It also offered Russia the opportunity to significantly expand its military presence in the Middle East and Mediterranean region. Russia was therefore able to establish itself as an unavoidable actor with limited power to shape but great power to prevent.

Another element of the new reality is that Russia, Iran, the UAE and Turkey deploy mercenaries and support militias as a way of exerting their influence. In doing so, they undermine state structures and sponsor a pool of fighters with different ideological orientations; a situation that is likely to destabilise the region in the long-term, even beyond the current conflict arenas.

The leaders' *assessments of regional security dynamics* have changed in that authoritarian restoration following the Arab uprisings can now be considered successful in much of the region, whereas regime change in Syria is no longer considered realistic. Internationally, too, this authoritarian restoration is now increasingly accepted as without alternative. What is more, the Palestinian question has lost further relevance for the Arab states, not least because their threat perceptions have changed and their interests have converged with those of Israel.

The prevailing *threat perception* in Israel and the Arab Gulf States, shared by leaders in Egypt and Morocco, is that Iran is expanding its influence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Iranian attacks on oil tankers in spring 2019, and drone and missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities executed by Tehran-backed Yemeni Huthi rebels in September, painfully revealed Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's vulnerability. Additionally, the Huthis in Yemen scored military successes. The aforementioned leaders also feel threatened by Turkey's geostrategic claims in the region, Ankara's increasingly interventionist policy in the Mediterranean and its support for groups

espousing political Islam. They see this support as a challenge to the governance models of the Gulf monarchies and Egypt alike.

Israel, Egypt and the Gulf States share the security-motivated *interest* in tying the US to the region in the long-term. They are also eager to promote economic recovery after Covid-19. The Arab Gulf States, in turn, seek to (further) diversify their economies.

Policy Recommendations for Germany and the EU

A new, conflict-prone regional order is taking shape in the Middle East. The rapprochements are first and foremost advantageous for those states and leaders directly involved. Only the normalisation of relations between Israel and the UAE brings forth tangible effects for the respective populations in the sense of a "warm peace". Still, the rapprochements do not offer any entry points for the settlement of long-lasting inter- or intra-state conflicts or for dealing with the socio-political causes of the Arab uprisings and their destabilising effects, for instance on Lebanon. On the contrary, in third countries (such as Algeria and Iran) they even intensify prevalent threat perceptions.

The potential for Germany and its partners in the EU to actively shape the trajectories of developments in their southern neighbourhood is quite limited in view of the dynamics analysed. Moreover, the more the policies and priorities of EU member states diverge, the less influence they can exert. It is therefore crucial that Europeans come together on issues of principle. Europeans should avoid being dragged into regional rivalries and refrain from engaging in one-sided partisanship with conflicting parties in the region. Further, Germany, the EU and its member states should not fuel armed conflicts by, for example, supplying weapons to conflicting parties such as Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

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The EU and its member states will only be able to play a mediating role if they take into account the interests and threat perceptions of all relevant actors. This is all the more important when establishing or supporting new formats for cooperation. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum, for example, which brings together Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Cyprus (with the EU and US as observers), is perceived by Turkey as an exclusive club. Consequently, since its inception in 2019, it has increased, not decreased, tensions in the Mediterranean. In this context, it is paramount to support the current approaches to resuming dialogue between Ankara, Athens and Nicosia, as well as between Ankara and Cairo through mediation.

While exchanging with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the EU should adequately consider the increased influence of the Arab Gulf States. This would mean, among other things, not limiting itself to trade relations, but expanding the exchange to issues of regional order and security. This should also include a dialogue that accompanies the negotiations on a new nuclear agreement with Iran with the aim of promoting regional understanding and reducing perceived threats. A starting point for addressing the Saudi-Iranian hegemonic conflict could be the track-two talks which the two states have been holding for some time. Another important topic should be Syria. Here, the EU and its member states should focus their efforts primarily on improving the humanitarian situation and the enduring stabilisation of Syria instead of concentrating on preventing Arab states' rehabilitation of the country. Last but not least, the EU and its member states should discuss with the states of the GCC how the normalisation agreements with Israel can be conducive to constructively dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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