Accessing the Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East

August 2018

By Mehran Kamrava

Mehran Kamrava is Professor and Director of the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar. He is the author most recently of *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (Cornell University Press, 2018) and *Inside the Arab State* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Abstract: *Tensions have long been a feature of the international relations of the Middle East. After the 2011 Arab uprisings, regional instability is being driven by a confluence of three interrelated developments. First, the weakening role of the United States as a power balancer in the Middle East, combined with the larger global context, has provided assumptions about threats and new opportunities for local and other actors to pursue strategic and foreign policy objectives that have deepened tensions and regional competition. Second, there has been a juxtaposing of power multipolarity with ideological multipolarity, itself a source of increased instability, with two of the regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, fanning opposing sectarian flames to further their respective strategic objectives. Third, this strategic competition is being played out in several newly weakened or collapsing states such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Similarly, the regional powers' competition in previously weakened states, such as Lebanon and Iraq, has intensified due to the acquisition of new, sectarian dimensions. These developments are likely to perpetuate instability and tensions in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.*

The international relations of the Middle East have long featured turmoil, instability, and tension. After the 2011 Arab uprisings, this instability has been fueled by a combination of three developments—at least two of which were either completely or mostly nonexistent before the Arab Spring erupted. A first development concerns the declining role of the United States as an off- or onshore balancer in the Middle East. The global context of the last decade has entailed a steady weakening of the U.S. role and position as a dominant power in the region. This weakening has occurred despite, or perhaps because of, the U.S.'s expansive military presence in the region since 1991. Particularly during the Obama administration, the Saudi government assumed, in hindsight mistakenly, that the U.S. commitment to the kingdom's protection was waning. It thus decided to protect and forward proactively its interests itself, adopting steadily more assertive foreign and security policies after

doi: 10.1016/j.orbis.2018.08.003

2013. These actions only added fuel to the kingdom's intense competition with Iran and further deepened the region-wide security dilemma.

Assumptions about declining U.S. interest or influence in the Middle East have not necessarily prompted other great powers to step in and fill a perceived military or political vacuum. The European Union (EU) and China have mostly commercial interests in the region, and Russia's strategic interests have been limited mostly to some of the region's hotspots such as Syria. This larger global and regional context has in turn prompted local aspirants to become more assertive in foreign and security policy pursuits and to compete with one another for greater influence and even regional hegemony.

The larger global context has provided space and opportunity for Middle Eastern states to try to enhance their own positions both in their neighborhood and beyond. They have sought to do so by forging new regional friendships and alliances and also by taking advantage of the total or near collapse of central authority in several Middle Eastern countries after 2011. In the post-2011 era, there are four of these regional powers vying for greater influence and clout—namely Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. The competition among these powers as well as their efforts to expand their influence is a second contributing cause to regional tensions and instability.

By itself, multipolarity does not translate into instability automatically. In the Middle East, however, power and ideological multipolarity have been transposed onto a highly volatile landscape resulting from an unprecedented proliferation of weak or collapsing states. Ostensibly "strong" states such as Libya and Syria, in addition to Yemen, all but collapsed following the 2011 uprisings. Under very different circumstances, the consequences of the uprisings also further weakened already fragile central authorities in Lebanon and Iraq. The ensuing fractures provided new threats and opportunities in the on-going competition among the regional powers, prompting them to exploit the resulting vacuum, either directly or through allies and proxies, in order to undermine each other and to expand their own spheres of influence. In the process, they have further deepened the dysfunction of the weak states.

Individually, none of these three developments—assumptions about declining U.S. interests and influence, multipolarity, and weak state proliferation—are sufficient to result in instability in the region. Nor are any of them necessarily new to the Middle East. The Saudis, despite their historically close relations with the United States, have long shown an independence streak and have not always toed the American line. Multipolarity in the region also long predates 2011. And, as far as state fragility is concerned, Lebanon has had weak central authority since its independence, witnessed a prolonged civil war (1975-1990), and was then subject to interference by Syria, Israel, Iran, and others. But it was only in the post-2011 period that all three developments emerged simultaneously and converged, each reinforcing the other. It is this convergence that accounts for the on-going volatility of the international relations of the Middle East.