

Renewed Conflicts in the Middle East (Dynamics and Transformations)

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Abstract

The Middle East is witnessing a wave of renewed conflicts that are no longer the traditional form of interstate conflict. Rather, they have evolved into more complex and fragmented forms due to multiple factors, including the disintegration of the nation-state, the rise of non-state actors, and increasing regional and international interventions. This study examines the new dynamics governing these conflicts, analyzing the shift in the nature of actors from states to militias and transnational groups, as well as the shift in the tools of conflict, which have shifted from regular wars to asymmetric and proxy wars. The study also discusses the role of major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China in reshaping the contours of conflict in the region, and anticipates future scenarios in light of global geopolitical transformations. The study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the structure of modern conflict, exploring the opportunities for settlement, and the potential risks if comprehensive political solutions continue to be absent.

Keywords: Conflict in the Middle East, Asymmetric Wars, Non-State Actors, Proxy Wars, Geopolitical Transformations, Major Powers

Introduction

The Middle East is one of the most volatile and unstable regions in the world. Over the decades, it has witnessed ongoing conflicts of varying causes, nature, and outcomes, ranging from nationalist conflicts and occupations, to regional wars, and to contemporary sectarian and civil conflicts. With the major transformations the region has witnessed since the beginning of the so-called "Arab Spring," conflicts in the Middle East have entered a new phase characterized by complexity and interconnectedness, the interweaving of local, regional, and international dynamics, the emergence of unconventional actors, and a shift in the patterns and tools of violence. These conflicts are no longer solely managed by armies and states; they have become an arena for armed groups, cross-border militias, and conflict-sponsoring states to clash. This has led to the disintegration of national state institutions, the exacerbation of humanitarian crises, and the region's transition from a state of political conflict to something resembling prolonged structural chaos.

Research problem:

In light of the rapid transformations, the researcher faces a central problem, which is:

What is the nature of the new dynamics governing the renewed conflicts in the Middle East? How have these transformations affected the structure of actors, the tools of conflict, and the prospects for future solutions? The main question is:

1. What are the most prominent features of the transformation in contemporary conflicts in the Middle East?

2. What is the role of international and regional powers in directing or containing the course of these conflicts?

Research Hypothesis: This study assumes that the renewed conflicts in the Middle East are no longer understood within the traditional framework of conflict between states, but are rather governed by new interactions, most notably the decline of the role of the state, the rise of unofficial actors, and the transformation of forms of conflict towards asymmetric wars, in light of a changing international balance characterized by multiple centers of influence.

The importance of research: The importance of this research stems from its exploration of one of the most sensitive and complex topics in contemporary international relations. It seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the transformations of conflict in a region that continues to play a pivotal role in energy security, international stability, and global trade corridors. It also aims to contribute to the development of new approaches to conflict analysis that go beyond traditional frameworks and address the changing reality in the Middle East.

Research objectives

1. Statement on the new dynamics governing renewed conflicts in the Middle East.
2. Studying transformations in the nature of actors and tools of conflict.
3. Highlighting the influence of major and regional powers in reshaping the security and political landscape in the region.
4. Clarifying possible future scenarios for these conflicts.

Methods

This research relies on the analytical-descriptive approach to studying the nature of conflicts and their transformations, employing the case study approach to analyze specific models of conflicts (such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya), in addition to the prospective approach to extrapolate the future of conflicts in light of regional and international transformations.

Research structure: The research structure includes two chapters. The first chapter deals with the dynamics driving conflicts in the Middle East. The second chapter deals with the transformations of conflicts and their future prospects.

Results and Discussion

Dynamics Driving Conflicts in the Middle East

The Middle East is witnessing renewed conflicts that are among the most complex and intertwined in the world. These conflicts stem from a set of interconnected dynamics that create a fertile environment for instability and prevent the achievement of lasting settlements. These dynamics do not operate in isolation; rather, they feed into and interact with each other, leading to the reproduction of conflict in new forms, even when the forms or actors change.

First requirement: political factors

Political factors are among the most prominent drivers explaining the outbreak and continuation of conflicts in the Middle East. These factors do not operate in isolation from other determinants, but they often form the basis upon which tensions are built, particularly in contexts where the state is fragile, institutions are weak, and legitimacy is shaken. In this context, three main manifestations can be highlighted that reflect the depth of the region's political crises.

First: The collapse of nation states and the weakness of state institutions

The failure of the nation-state-building project in a number of Arab countries has led to a political, security, and social vacuum, exploited by internal and external forces to fuel conflicts. The absence of effective governments, the disintegration of security services, and the decline of popular confidence in official institutions have all rendered the state a fragile entity, unable to control its territory or manage its affairs. In such environments, armed groups emerge, and the rule of law is replaced by the logic of force. What happened in Libya, Syria, and Yemen clearly embodies this collapse, as power was divided into warring entities, and the state lost its ability to legitimately monopolize violence, making the conflict an open arena for all warring parties. This collapse also created a new reality in which militias, local councils, and external actors operate beyond the authority of the central state (Khaled, 2011).

The collapse of the nation-state is one of the most dangerous political phenomena afflicting several countries in the Middle East. This collapse has become a direct and fundamental cause of the outbreak and escalation of conflicts. The state is not merely a geographical border or a central government; rather, it is a cohesive system of institutions that legitimately monopolizes the tools of power, provides security, manages the economy, and maintains social cohesion. When the state fails to perform these functions, the vacuum it leaves becomes a fertile environment for unrest and violence (Hamoud, 2011).

The state's failure to perform its basic functions.

State collapse typically begins with the erosion of a state's ability to perform its basic functions, such as providing security, delivering public services, managing the economy, and enforcing the law fairly. In some countries, such as Yemen, Syria, and Libya, central governments have lost the ability to control their territories and are unable to protect their borders or provide even the most basic services to their citizens. This has led to a loss of trust between citizens and the state, opening the door to the emergence of alternative authorities—such as militias, tribes, and armed groups—to fill the vacuum (Al-Baghdadi, 2000).

The erosion of the legitimacy of the political system

State weakness is closely linked to the crisis of legitimacy. Many ruling regimes in the Middle East came to power through coups or usurpations of power, and their legitimacy was not based on democratic principles or broad popular approval. This fragile type of legitimacy cannot withstand crises. When a state faces social, political, or economic challenges, its structural weakness becomes apparent, and it loses its ability to contain crises internally. With the loss of legitimacy, state institutions become either ineffective, biased, or corrupt, accelerating their collapse.

The disintegration of the security and military apparatuses

One of the most prominent indicators of a state's collapse is the disintegration of its security institutions, or their division along sectarian or regional lines. This was clearly seen in Iraq after 2003 and Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, where unified security forces no longer existed under a single central authority. In such a context, armed groups become de facto forces and begin to impose their authority by force, leading to the militarization of society and the multiplication of power centers. This makes the subsequent restoration of the state a complex and lengthy process (Mahfouz, 2005).

The spread of corruption, favoritism, and weak judiciary

State weakness is not limited to security aspects; it also includes widespread corruption, weak oversight institutions, and the collapse of the judiciary. When citizens feel that the state does not treat them fairly, and that its institutions are subject to the influence of the elite, sect, or family, national belonging declines, and sub-identities—religious, tribal, or regional—begin to

emerge as an alternative to the state. This social and political disintegration strikes at the heart of the nation-state and lays the foundation for long-term internal conflicts.

The results of state collapse: chaos and open conflicts

The collapse of a state creates a political and security vacuum, which is quickly filled by various actors, including terrorist groups (such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, militias supported by external powers, or local authorities with a tribal or sectarian character. The result is total chaos, and the country turns into an arena for internal, regional, and international conflict, as happened in Syria and Yemen. Rebuilding a state after its collapse is often difficult because the parties that benefit from the collapse become resistant to any comprehensive national project that reunifies institutions.

The collapse of the nation-state in the Middle East is not merely a consequence of conflict; it is also a fundamental cause of its continuation and expansion. Weak institutions, eroding legitimacy, the absence of law, and the multiplicity of power centers are all factors that empty the state of its substance, transforming it from a tool for stability into an arena of chaos. Therefore, genuine political settlements cannot be envisioned without a comprehensive project to rebuild the state, based on legal, just, and institutional foundations that preserve rights and accommodate everyone.

Second: Regional and international interventions

Conflicts in the Middle East were never purely internal affairs. Rather, they quickly turned into proxy conflicts, with regional and international actors intervening to support local factions with the aim of expanding their influence or achieving their strategic interests. This intervention often prolongs the conflict, detracts from its local character, and complicates the path to resolution. In Syria, for example, multiple powers have intervened: Russia and Iran to support the regime, the United States to support opposition forces and Kurdish organizations, and Turkey to protect its border interests. In Yemen, the conflict is now between the internationally recognized government, supported by the Arab coalition, and the Houthis, supported by Iran, within the framework of regional competition between Riyadh and Tehran. These interventions are not only militarizing conflicts, but are also reshaping the region's political map according to the interests of external actors, rather than the will of the people or the logic of national sovereignty.

Third: The struggle for power and political legitimacy

The struggle over who rules and how to be ruled is one of the most prominent causes of crises in the Middle East. Most ruling regimes lack effective political legitimacy based on popular representation, the rule of law, or accountability mechanisms. This legitimacy vacuum often leads to open power struggles, especially when political consensus is absent or participation tools are disrupted (Al-Nasari, 1990).

What happened in Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan is a clear example of the failure of political elites to govern in a fair and inclusive manner, leading to popular uprisings and protests that quickly devolved into conflict or permanent political paralysis. In the most severe cases, such as Libya and Syria, the struggle for power turned into all-out armed confrontations, drawing in regional and international interventions.

The struggle for legitimacy is not limited to regimes, but also extends to groups that refuse to recognize the existing regime and present themselves as a legitimate alternative, whether through weapons or through religious or sectarian discourse (Hussein, 2004).

Political factors represent the general framework within which the remaining determinants of conflict in the Middle East interact. State weakness, interference by external parties, and the

struggle for legitimacy all form a vicious cycle that reproduces violence and prevents the building of stable political institutions. Conflicts in the region cannot be addressed without a comprehensive political approach that restores the state's prestige, enhances its legitimacy, and curbs foreign intervention.

The second requirement: economic and social factors

Economic and social factors play a central role in fueling renewed conflicts in the Middle East. Crises not only arise in a political vacuum, but are also rooted in dysfunctional economic structures and deteriorating social conditions. In many cases, these factors are the fuel that ignites protests and transforms them into open conflicts, especially in light of the absence of economic justice, worsening poverty and unemployment, and the marginalization of broad segments of society (Haidar, 2005).

The widening gap between social classes and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a narrow group of political and economic elites are among the most prominent manifestations of the structural imbalance in the economies of the Middle East. Many countries in the region possess vast natural resources (such as oil and gas, but have failed to transform these resources into equitable and sustainable development.

Youth unemployment is among the highest rates in the world in countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Iraq, and Syria, where young people constitute more than 60% of the population, yet suffer from economic exclusion. This marginalization has led to feelings of deprivation and futility, making young people easy prey for recruitment into armed groups or involvement in violent protest movements.

Many governments have adopted privatization policies and lifted subsidies on basic commodities, based on recommendations from international financial institutions, without establishing social safety nets. These types of imposed reforms have exacerbated the suffering of the poor, exacerbated class inequalities, and led to widespread social protests, such as (Balfraz, 2010): 1) Protests in Jordan over taxes and high cost of living; 2) The uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq were caused by corruption and the lack of basic services.

In these cases, the demands were not only political, but were primarily socio-economic, demanding dignity, justice, and the provision of a minimum decent life.

Many Middle Eastern countries suffer from chronic deterioration in basic services, such as education, health, water, and electricity. When the state fails to provide these needs, it loses a significant portion of its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens, entrenching feelings of marginalization and discrimination.

In Yemen, for example, the economic collapse and deteriorating services have contributed to widening the gap between the population and the authorities, creating a state of social explosion.

In Syria, the revolution was preceded by regional protests over water scarcity and the deteriorating conditions of farmers in Deir ez-Zor and Daraa, reflecting that social aspects were an integral part of the roots of the crisis.

Many Middle Eastern countries rely on a rentier economy, which is not based on production but rather on the distribution of rent (such as oil revenues according to political and sectarian considerations, creating a clientelist economy controlled by proximity to power. This situation leads to (Thanaa, 2006): 1) Marginalization of rural or peripheral areas that do not represent the political base of the ruling regime; 2) Popular anger explodes when these areas suffer from deliberate exclusion.

In Tunisia, for example, the spark of the revolution came from the economically marginalized city of Sidi Bouzid. In Sudan, uprisings have repeatedly erupted in remote areas such as Darfur, Kordofan, and Blue Nile.

Economic and social crises also lead to widespread internal displacement toward major cities, placing pressure on services and infrastructure and creating "poverty belts" around cities. In many cases, these areas become hotbeds of rebellion or incubators for extremist groups, due to the marginalization of their populations and the lack of hope for peaceful change (Nasouri, 2011).

Economic and social factors are not merely the background to conflicts; they are their primary drivers. Poverty, unemployment, corruption, social inequality, and the unequal distribution of resources are all factors that make societies fragile and ready to explode at any moment. Therefore, any approach to resolving conflicts in the Middle East must not be limited to security or political solutions alone, but must include comprehensive economic reforms and genuine social justice as part of a strategy for sustainable stability (Jassim, 2011).

The second topic

Transformations of conflicts and their future prospects

Conflicts in the Middle East have witnessed fundamental transformations over the past two decades, whether in the nature of the actors involved, the patterns of violence used, or the declared political objectives. The region has transitioned from traditional interstate wars to complex internal conflicts of a sectarian, ethnic, and political nature, in which local, regional, and international factors intersect.

The first requirement: changes in the nature of actors

One of the most prominent features of conflicts in the Middle East in recent decades is the profound change in the nature of the actors involved in and influencing the course of conflicts. While conflicts previously took on a traditional character between sovereign states, governed by the rules of international law and diplomatic relations, today the arena of conflict in the region has become more complex and fragmented, with non-state actors becoming a fundamental part of the conflict landscape and, in many cases, outperforming weak central governments in terms of influence and power (Badawi, 1964).

Armed groups, sectarian militias, and ideological organizations have emerged, possessing resources, weapons, and regional connections, imposing political and security realities on the ground. A prominent example of this is ISIS, which for a period of time controlled vast areas of Iraq and Syria and established what resembled a state within two states, with institutions and an administration characterized by an extremist religious nature. Hezbollah is another example, having transformed from a resistance faction into an influential political and military actor in Lebanon and beyond, and has even become a tool of the regional conflict between Iran and its opponents (Al-Aswad, 1986).

These groups no longer operate in a vacuum; rather, they weave complex networks of support and funding, some of which are local and rely on economic resources (such as illicit trade or the imposition of tributes, while others come from regional states seeking to expand their influence through local proxies. Thus, these forces have transformed from mere armed opposition groups into negotiating parties, summoned at international conferences, and their positions taken into account in political solution equations, despite their illegitimacy from the state's perspective. In contrast, the nation-state is experiencing an existential crisis in some Middle Eastern countries. Protracted conflicts, internal divisions, and rampant corruption have eroded the legitimacy of the central authority, weakened institutions, and led to a loss of control

over large parts of its territory. This power vacuum is often filled by armed groups, which sometimes present themselves as an alternative protector or service provider, earning them relative popular support in some marginalized environments.

The most dangerous shift in this context is the transition of these groups from a position of resistance or opposition to a position of authority, through actual control over territory, participation in governance, or even the imposition of their own laws and regulations, as is happening in parts of Yemen, Syria, or Iraq. This situation reshapes the concept of sovereignty and legitimacy and establishes a new model of actors that combines armed and political, local and cross-border aspects.

The transformations of the conflict in the Middle East are no longer confined to the change of goals or means, but have extended to the basic structure of the conflict, as the parties themselves have changed, and new types of actors have emerged that are difficult to subject to traditional legal and political systems, which increases the complexity of the crisis, makes solutions more difficult, and requires a reconsideration of the tools of analysis and dealing (Jassim, 2011).

First: The role of cross-border movements

In light of the major transformations that the Middle East has witnessed over the past two decades, transnational movements have emerged as active forces in the political and military landscape. These movements are defined as organizations whose activities are not limited to a single country, but rather extend their influence and activities to multiple countries, whether through physical presence on the ground or through networks of ideological, material, and military support. These movements have transcended traditional geographical borders and have become a clear challenge to the concept of national sovereignty and the modern state.

What distinguishes these movements is their ideological nature that transcends national identities, and their reliance on sectarian, denominational, religious, or political ties, which allows them to expand their influence and implement their agendas beyond borders. These movements also rely on a flexible organizational structure that allows them to adapt to pressures and persecution, and allows them to move across diverse political and security environments. This has enabled them to survive, and even expand, despite the major military confrontations they have been exposed to (Al-Aswad, 1986).

Moreover, these movements take advantage of the security vacuum and institutional weakness in some countries, finding a nurturing environment, or at least a soft environment, that allows them to infiltrate and expand, as occurred in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. As a result, these organizations have become a major player that cannot be ignored in any political settlement or regional security architecture, complicating efforts to establish peace and rebuild the state in these regions.

Second: The decline of the role of the central state

In contrast to the rise of informal movements and groups, there is a clear decline in the role of the central state in many Middle Eastern countries. This decline is due to several factors, most notably internal divisions, civil wars, administrative corruption, and the failure of economic and social policies, in addition to foreign interventions that have weakened the sovereignty of national decision-making

The state, once the primary guarantor of security, stability, and service provision, has, in some cases, become completely or partially absent from the scene. In countries such as Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq, central governments have lost control over large swaths of their territories to armed groups, parallel authorities, or direct foreign intervention. This has led to the disintegration of the political and institutional fabric and the collapse of the administrative

and service systems, causing citizens to lose confidence in the state as a source of legitimacy and protection. This decline in the role of the central state was not limited to the military or security level, but also extended to economic and social aspects. With the collapse of public services, the absence of justice, and the rise of poverty and unemployment, local forces—religious, tribal, or armed—emerged to fill this void, imposing alternative systems that reflect their narrow interests or regional affiliations. In this context, the state becomes a mere formal entity, while actual power is exercised by unofficial parties with money, weapons, and regional support.

International transformations, particularly the decline in the involvement of major powers in supporting state building or stabilization, have also contributed to this decline. Western countries, after costly interventions, have become less willing to rebuild the institutions of weak states, leaving these countries vulnerable to chaos and conflict. The decline of the role of the central state in the Middle East is one of the most dangerous manifestations of the transformations of the conflict, because it opens the way to social and political disintegration, fuels a state of prolonged instability, and makes rebuilding the state an extremely complex project that requires internal will and international consensus that has been missing so far (Abdel Fattah, 1994).

The second requirement: the change in the forms of conflict

Conflicts in the Middle East no longer take the classic form that prevailed in the twentieth century, when confrontations mostly took place between the regular armies of opposing states. Recent years have witnessed a radical shift in the nature and forms of conflicts, whether in terms of the tools used, the nature of the confrontations, or even their objectives. This change was not random; rather, it came as a result of internal changes in the structure of states, the rise of new actors, technological and military developments, as well as unconventional regional and international interventions.

One of the most prominent manifestations of this transformation is the transition from regular warfare to asymmetric warfare. Whereas wars used to be fought between armies with similar armaments and subject to the laws of war, today's confrontations are between regular armies on the one hand and irregular organizations on the other, such as armed militias or extremist groups. These factions often rely on hit-and-run tactics, suicide attacks, ambushes, mines, drones, and other methods that are difficult to deal with within the rules of conventional warfare. This type of conflict drains regular armies, prolongs the conflict, and makes a military resolution more difficult (Nasr, 1993).

In addition, the phenomenon of proxy wars has emerged as a prevalent pattern in the region. Major or regional powers are no longer waging direct wars, but rather rely on the support of local parties with money, weapons, and political cover to implement their agendas. In Yemen, for example, we see an internal conflict between the legitimate government and the Houthis, but in reality, it is part of a regional confrontation between Iran on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other. In Syria, we see an arena where Iranian, Russian, American, and Turkish influence intersects, through local parties that implement the policies of these countries and fight on their behalf (Spain, 2018).

Another form of change is the transformation of some conflicts into disputes over natural resources. With the worsening water crisis, declining resources, and rising energy demand, new tensions of a strategic economic nature have begun to emerge, such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) issue between Egypt and Ethiopia, the dispute over oil in Libya, or the groundwater dispute in the border areas between Iraq, Syria, and Jordan. These conflicts, while not always bloody, are likely to escalate, especially when coupled with state weakness

and increasing population pressures. On the other hand, modern technology is reshaping the battlefield. Drones, cyber warfare, and intelligent surveillance systems have become crucial in directing battles and carrying out precise operations with minimal human cost. This transformation gives some small parties an asymmetrical ability to inflict significant harm on their opponents, and makes the traditional balance of power less important than before (Khawajiyah, 2021).

One of the most dangerous features of the changing nature of conflict is the erosion of the line between civilian and military. Armed groups often operate within civilian environments, exposing populations to displacement, bombardment, and siege. Targeting infrastructure as a means of pressure has become commonplace, leading to major humanitarian disasters, deepening the suffering of communities, and exacerbating refugee and displacement crises. The changing forms of conflict in the Middle East reflect a new reality that requires different tools for understanding and addressing it. Traditional solutions based on military resolution or quick settlement are no longer feasible, and it seems that current conflicts are likely to continue in various forms unless their political, social, and economic roots are comprehensively addressed (Al-Aswad, 1986).

One of the most striking transformations in contemporary conflicts in the Middle East is the gradual transition from conventional warfare to asymmetric warfare. In conventional warfare, confrontations were fought between the armies of sovereign states, confronted on known battlefields and using conventional weapons. Both sides were subject, at least in theory, to the rules of international humanitarian law. Asymmetric warfare, on the other hand, is fought between two unequal parties: a state on one side and armed groups on the other. These groups often adopt unconventional tactics, devoid of clear ethics or laws, and employ methods that rely on surprise, flexibility, and concealment among civilians.

This type of warfare poses significant challenges to regular armies, which find themselves forced to deal with an invisible enemy that does not wear a uniform and does not have fixed military bases, making confrontations costly, lengthy, and inconclusive. These characteristics were clearly evident in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, and then in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, where government armies faced diverse opponents who possessed flexible fighting methods and combined military action with media and advocacy efforts (Ikram, 2006).

Asymmetric wars also tend to be protracted wars of attrition, affecting the social and economic fabric of the state, and placing civilians at the heart of the conflict, exacerbating humanitarian crises and complicating reconstruction efforts (Adel, 2004).

In recent decades, the Middle East has become a model arena for what are known as proxy wars, where regional and international powers avoid direct conflict and instead resort to supporting local parties to advance their agendas and interests on the ground. This type of war allows major powers to achieve strategic gains without incurring the full political and military costs of direct intervention.

The war in Yemen is a stark example of this pattern of conflict, pitting the Saudi- and Emirati-backed government against the Iranian-backed Houthis. Proxy wars have also been clearly evident in Syria, which has become an arena for conflicting interests between Russia, the United States, Iran, and Turkey, each of which supports different local factions. These wars create complex conflicts, in which it is difficult to distinguish between the local, regional, and international. They often prolong the conflict and complicate any political process. They also make local actors hostage to external agendas, weakening the chances of reaching home-grown solutions and increasing the fragmentation of societies and state structures (Abdul Razzaq, 2021).

Amid population pressures, climate change, and economic decline, natural resources—particularly water, oil, and energy—have become major drivers of conflict in the Middle East. The region, one of the world's driest, is experiencing rising tensions due to water scarcity and a declining ability to meet population needs, along with the struggle over oil and gas fields as a source of wealth and power. A prominent example of this type of conflict is the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Egypt considers an existential threat to its water security. Iraq is also suffering from a significant decline in water levels due to the construction of dams in Türkiye and Iran, threatening food security and increasing tensions in regional relations.

In Libya, the conflict over oil was one of the main causes of the war, as the warring parties sought control of oil fields as a major source of funding. In Syria, potential gas pipelines and oil resources in the northeast played a role in fueling the conflict and intersecting international interests.

In this context, natural resources have become not only economic factors, but also strategic tools used in negotiation or blackmail, and may turn into fuel for future conflicts unless they are managed in a cooperative and fair manner between the riparian states or those sharing the wealth (Ikram, 2006).

The third requirement: future scenarios

Conflicts in the Middle East are heading toward unresolved junctures, amidst the interplay of local factors with regional and international shifts. As these conflicts become increasingly complex in terms of parties, tools, and dimensions, the fundamental question remains: What is the future of these conflicts? Are they likely to escalate? Or are there real opportunities for de-escalation and settlement? The answer depends on a range of possible scenarios, some of which hold signs of hope, while others portend continued chaos and instability.

Despite the complex and fragmented conflict landscape, the region is not without indicators that may pave the way for partial or gradual political settlements. Some parties, exhausted militarily and economically, have begun to demonstrate a greater willingness to sit at the negotiating table. For example, the Yemeni file has witnessed cautious moves toward a de-escalation mediated by the United Nations and a growing role for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in attempting to end the war. Some preliminary understandings have also begun to emerge in Libya between the conflicting parties, under UN auspices and international support, albeit with limited scope and impact.

But these opportunities face profound obstacles, most notably the lack of trust between the parties, conflicting foreign agendas, and the fragility of national institutions. Furthermore, local political and military forces often fear losing or being eliminated if a comprehensive settlement is imposed. Therefore, the prospects for a settlement will not be effective unless it is built on comprehensive processes that go beyond a ceasefire, but extend to rebuilding the state, promoting national reconciliation, and enforcing the rule of law.

Major powers play a pivotal role in determining the course of conflict or settlement in the Middle East, but the nature of this role has changed in recent years. The United States, which has long been the main player in the region, has begun to reduce its direct military intervention, relying instead on the support of its strategic allies or through partial alliances. Nevertheless, Washington still holds significant leverage, whether through economic sanctions, military support for certain parties, or influence over Security Council resolutions. In contrast, Russia has expanded its regional influence, taking advantage of the vacuum created by the declining US role, particularly in Syria, where it has become a guarantor of the Syrian regime and an

indispensable military partner. Moscow is also attempting to build economic and military alliances in countries such as Libya and Sudan.

China, for its part, prefers to use soft power tools, economic investment, and technology, but it has recently begun to exert its political and diplomatic influence, as evidenced by the Chinese-brokered agreement to resume relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Beijing is expected to seek to expand its role in conflict resolution to secure its energy and trade interests, without becoming involved in direct military conflicts.

In this scenario, the major powers are not united in their approach, but rather are exploiting conflicts to serve the global balance of power, which may complicate the chances of solutions, but at the same time gives local powers room to maneuver.

As global geopolitical shifts accelerate, the potential for redrawing the balance of power in the Middle East is increasing. The Russian-Western conflict in Ukraine and the tension between China and the United States in the Pacific could reorder international priorities and diminish attention to the region, leaving conflicts in an international vacuum or under unbalanced regional management.

In light of the above, it can be said that the future of conflicts in the Middle East will not witness comprehensive settlements in the near term. Rather, the outcomes will range from freezing conflicts, temporary calms, and the continuation of chronic hotspots of tension, unless new approaches are designed that go beyond security solutions and address the political, social, and economic roots of the conflict.

The United States has been, and remains, the most important and influential actor in Middle Eastern affairs since the end of World War II. Washington has pursued a policy of direct engagement, whether through support for its traditional allies (Israel, the Gulf states, and Jordan) or through military intervention, as occurred in Iraq in 2003. But since the era of President Obama, through Trump, and up to Biden, the features of a gradual American withdrawal began to become clear, as Washington became less willing to involve itself in long-term conflicts, and began to focus on other priorities such as containing China, technological competition, and internal security.

This "relative withdrawal" does not mean the United States has abandoned the region, but rather a change in its approach to intervention. Its intervention has become focused on soft power tools, economic sanctions, and partial alliances such as the Abraham Accords, or support for "stabilization through partners," as in its support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria without extensive field intervention. Nevertheless, Washington remains a pivotal player in major issues such as the Iranian nuclear issue, Israeli security, Gulf stability, and normalization processes.

Russia has exploited the declining US role to bolster its military and political presence in the region, to a degree unprecedented since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was clearly demonstrated by its decisive military intervention in Syria in 2015 to support the Assad regime, which returned Moscow to the forefront of regional influence.

Russia seeks to play the role of a "guarantor" in conflicts, as it did in the Syrian-Turkish negotiations, or in Libya, where it supported Haftar's forces and attempted to establish a permanent presence on the Libyan coast. It also promotes itself as an international balancing power that can speak to all parties, including Israel, Iran, and Turkey, giving it the ability to maneuver and win allies.

Despite the challenges Russia faced after the Ukraine war and Western sanctions, it did not withdraw from the Middle East. Rather, it attempted to reposition its forces and strengthen its

partnerships in the energy and defense sectors with countries such as Egypt, Algeria, and Sudan. Unlike the United States and Russia, China is pursuing a more subdued and strategically intelligent policy in the region, based on economic and diplomatic expansion without direct military engagement. The Belt and Road Initiative represents a key pillar of China's strategy, seeking to secure trade and energy corridors from the Gulf to East Asia through massive port, railway, and infrastructure projects.

But the most striking shift was China's entry into the political mediation process, as evidenced by the agreement to resume relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023, which Beijing sponsored for the first time, sending a clear message that China is not only seeking economic interests, but also playing a role in political and regional stability. China relies on the "principle of non-interference in the internal affairs" of other countries, but at the same time it exerts soft influence through the economy, technology, and quiet diplomacy. This role is expected to increase in the future, especially in the energy sector, as Beijing relies heavily on Gulf oil (Razzaq, 2021).

What's interesting about the Middle East scene today is that the major powers are not engaged in a direct conflict over the region, but rather are pursuing overlapping patterns of influence, cooperation, and rivalry. The United States competes with China economically and confronts Russia in limited contexts, but it does not yet have a comprehensive strategy to counter Beijing's or Moscow's influence in the Middle East. On the other hand, China and Russia's relations in the region are not without underlying tensions, especially given their divergent interests in issues such as Syria and Libya. Furthermore, some regional states—such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia—are capitalizing on this diversity in international power centers to achieve a balance between partners and reduce reliance on any one party.

Conclusion

This study reveals that conflicts in the Middle East are no longer managed according to their traditional patterns. Rather, they have become more complex and intertwined due to profound transformations in the structure of the state, its actors, and the tools of conflict. With the escalating role of militias and transnational groups, and the increase in foreign interventions, it has become difficult to separate local, regional, and international factors in understanding the conflict landscape. The study also shows that major powers play a pivotal role in directing the course of the conflict, whether directly or through local proxies. In the absence of comprehensive political solutions, the chances of a genuine settlement appear limited, while the risks associated with the perpetuation and sustainability of the conflict are increasing. Therefore, achieving stability requires rebuilding the nation-state, strengthening governance, and launching regional and international dialogue initiatives capable of addressing the roots of crises, not merely their outcomes. Therefore, we have reached a number of conclusions and recommendations:

First: Conclusions

The transformation of conflicts in the Middle East from their traditional forms to new patterns is one of the most prominent features of the current phase. Conflicts are no longer limited to conflicts between states, but have taken on a multidimensional, internal character, fueled by identity factors, sectarian divisions, economic interests, and foreign interventions.

The decline of the central state and the rise of non-state actors, such as militias and transnational groups, has contributed to reshaping the region's security and political landscape and produced hybrid governance models that pose a real challenge to rebuilding states and their institutions.

Forms of conflict have undergone qualitative transformations, with asymmetric wars, proxy wars, and resource conflicts becoming prominent features, which has increased the complexity of traditional solutions, prolonged conflicts, and exacerbated their human and social costs.

The major powers no longer deal with the Middle East from a perspective of absolute dominance, but rather by balancing their interests within a cautious competitive framework, ranging from partial engagement (as in American policy) to strategic expansion (as in the Russian case), and a calm and orderly rise (as in the Chinese model).

Opportunities for political settlements still exist, but they are fragile and limited. They require solid internal consensus and balanced regional and international guarantees, in addition to addressing the structural roots of the conflicts, not just their military symptoms.

Second: Recommendations

Rebuilding the nation-state must be a central priority, by strengthening institutions, enhancing the rule of law, and building a new social contract that engages all components of society and addresses historical, regional, and sectarian grievances.

Strengthening regional dialogue between countries affected by conflicts (such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Egypt) can ease tensions and transform confrontation into opportunities for security and political cooperation, especially in overlapping issues such as Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

Pushing major powers toward a more coordinated and responsible approach to dealing with Middle East crises, beyond the logic of military tools or competition for influence, in favor of supporting initiatives for stability, development, and regional integration.

The need to expand the role of regional and international organizations, such as the League of Arab States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the United Nations, in providing political solutions and humanitarian aid, in addition to monitoring the implementation of agreements and ensuring their transparency.

Investing in development and social justice is essential to preventing the recurrence of conflict, as unemployment, poverty, and marginalization are fertile ground for the emergence of extremist groups and societal divisions.

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