



THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS

In the post-Arab Spring Middle East, the forces of geopolitics and geo-economics are shaping the region and potentially point to a more cooperative future

By Abdel Monem Said Aly

Geopolitics is a concept in the study of international relations that refers to the impact of geography on formulating the national interests of states. Originally, the concept evolved at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to define the roles of seas and lands in creating global powers. That was a period when Great Britain and its navy dominated most of the globe in what was known as “Pax Britannica,” or the British Peace. For almost a century (1815–1914), Great Britain projected itself and its power—military and economic—to set the course of politics in Europe and the rest of the globe. Post-World War I, the nation-states of the Middle East emerged as a result of the imperial reach of global powers and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

During World War I and World War II, the concept of geopolitics evolved even more around the idea of “power politics,” “balance of power,” and “national interests” as defining concepts for regional and international interactions. Power politics are related to geographical locations, which play a prominent role in defining state capabilities and orientations. For example, the discovery of oil in the Middle East and the rising importance of the Suez Canal and the straits of Bab Al-Mandab in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf increased the game of power politics in the Middle East during the world wars and the Cold War periods.

The state of the Middle East in the “Arab Spring” period was based politically and strategically on two concepts. First, intrastate conflicts and contradictions became bloodier and more paramount than interstate regional ones. Civil warfare has proliferated in the region in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. Second, the state became less effective as a primary actor in regional relations. There emerged other non-state actors: a resurgent Muslim Brotherhood, new iterations of its kin Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Some non-state actors even had their own particular ideas

◀ *The Leviathan natural gas field in the Mediterranean Sea, off the coast of Haifa, Jan. 31, 2019.
Marc Israel Sellem/Reuters*

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Today, nearly a decade on from the beginning of the Arab Spring, things have changed. It has become necessary for states across the region to reassert themselves and seek to restore stability and economic development. Key to this process will be economic cooperation within the bounds of power politics in two leading geographical areas of the

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: the Red Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Original Sin

For most of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the prevailing question about the Middle East was why the region was not responding to the waves of democratization and the globalization of human rights that were knocking at the doors of Eastern Europe, Latin America, and East and Southeast Asia. Volumes were written to understand and interpret what seemed to be a Middle East exception from the general rules that had prevailed elsewhere. Surprisingly, when the region finally exploded with upheavals and revolutions starting in 2010, the Arab Middle East and North Africa were painted as being “exceptional” from the historical norms on massive social change. The region that only a few years earlier had been considered ensconced in decay and ossification was by some onlookers described in the heady days of 2010–2011 as being violence-prone. The instability in the Arab World, said these analysts, had risen to levels unseen since the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century.

This approach to the Middle East—particularly to point to Arab countries—as being exceptional is not helpful for the general study of states and societies, or for policymaking. In many ways it placed the region beyond the scope of conventional social sciences, even beyond the “normal” course of history. Dismissing events in the Arab Spring deprived analysis of the region from the richness of experience of social change across the globe. In fact, there is no comparable evidence that the situation in the Middle East during the Arab Spring, as horrifying as it was at times, was more violent than the 1950s and 1960s during the decolonization process and the multiple wars of the Arab–Israeli conflict, or when the population of the region was declining in numbers because of poverty and disease under Ottoman rule.

There is, furthermore, no evidence that the situation in the MENA region now is much worse than it was in Europe during the nineteenth century in the post-French Revolution era. In fact, anarchism became part of the general European political philosophy of the nineteenth century, led by Bakunin, Proudhon, and even Tolstoy. Nor is there any empirical evidence that the situation in the Middle East today is worse than it was in Southeast Asia during and after the Vietnam War (1955–1975). The same rings true in comparison with Sub-Saharan Africa in the past few decades.

The Re-Rise of the State

The past five years have witnessed the Middle East facing gradual recovery, as well as the restoration of state-based geopolitics. In virtually all cases, complex diplomatic processes were put into play involving regional powers—particularly Iran, Turkey, and Israel, as well as the United States, Russia, and the United Nations. From 2013 onward, terrorist non-state actors have been driven back. The Muslim Brotherhood lost its main base in Egypt. Al-Qaeda was chased out of many areas. In 2018, ISIS suffered a total defeat with the loss of its geographic territorial seat and the terminal decline of its “Islamic caliphate.”

Nevertheless, these actors have not been entirely eliminated; they are still active in the region. Generally, however, the nation-state has recovered and begun to reassert itself once more. The U.S.-aided victory over ISIS in Iraq gave the Iraqi state the vigor it needed to manage the crisis with the Kurds at the time of the Kurdish independence referendum. While the referendum won in the polls, the independence bid failed and the Kurds returned to the negotiating table. In 2011, Bashar Al-Assad’s Syria was suspended from the Arab League, and ending Baathist rule was seen as a fundamental principle in all negotiating proposals. With Russian assistance, however, the Syrian government has returned to the fore at home and abroad and, for the first time, the Americans and Russians have agreed that Syria needs to survive as a sovereign state. The form and substance of that state is another question—one to be resolved at the negotiating table.

Meanwhile, non-Arab regional powers have increased their military intervention in the Arab region. Initially, Iran relied on cross-border actors, using its relationships with Shia groups throughout the region, as can be seen with the People’s Mobilization Units in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, and to some degree the Houthis in Yemen. Now, Iran no longer just supports and assists local players. It is active on the ground through its Revolutionary Guards, working to create a military corridor across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon so as to acquire a border with Israel. The purpose of this is not

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just to be able to play defender of the Palestinian cause, but also to create some leverage to use against the United States to compel Washington to change its stance toward Tehran and the nuclear deal.

Turkey, too, began to intervene militarily for its own purposes during the war against ISIS. Ankara has allocated some of its forces to weaken Kurdish forces that were fighting ISIS but which offer safe spaces and supplies to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey regards as a terrorist organization. With the defeat of ISIS, Turkey's political geography has induced it to augment its military intervention and belligerency in the service of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's notion of Turkish national security. This helps explain the Turkish military offensive against Afrin and, at the same time, its attempt to intervene in the context of natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara rejects the Egyptian–Cypriot maritime borders agreement and has attempted to forcefully prevent the Italian-based ENI oil and gas company from continuing with its exploration activities in that area.

Geopolitics is Back

Gradually, the Middle East has returned to where it was before, when geopolitical factors dominated the question of security in the region. The Yemeni civil war is no longer a domestic war, nor is it a Sunni and Shia struggle. It is the product of Iranian influence, which is being countered by the Arab coalition under the leadership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Israel, for its part, after years of rejoicing in what befell the other countries in the region, found itself looking at an unfamiliar Syria. That changed when Syria became the backdrop of the February 2018 Iranian drone incident, the Israeli bombardment of an Iranian military base, and the downing of an Israeli jet. The struggle for Syria is no longer about Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, or the Muslim Brotherhood. It is about the Israeli–Iranian confrontation over who will bring first Syria, and then Lebanon, onto its side in the bargain. State-to-state competition is once again the order of the day. Nonetheless, internal state reform is needed to restore stability and coherence to the state-based system.

Egypt has always opted for a different approach to the use of military force. For Cairo, it is a means to convey explicit security-related messages, to draw red lines, and to give clear and unequivocal signals. The Comprehensive Operation Sinai 2018 (COS 2018) was an opportunity to signal that Egypt is not only determined to eliminate the remnants of terrorist organizations in Sinai, but also that it rejects, by deploying naval units, any Turkish intervention against an agreement grounded in international maritime law and the international recognition of the state of Cyprus. The Egyptian navy, which is participating in ensuring maritime security for COS 2018, staged maneuvers in which surface-to-sea and sea-to-sea missiles were fired, precisely in order to deliver this message to Ankara.

All these regional movements are informed by the region's political geography as shaped by conditions in 2019. On one hand, we find the consequences of the Iranian nuclear deal in its rise and fall intertwining with the election of a new U.S. president who is disposed to suspect Iranian intentions. On the other hand, there is the interplay over the reality of natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean and, specifically, the Zohr field in the Egyptian economic zone, which has already begun production. Political geography, with all its security and economic ramifications, has begun to assert itself once more in a region in which national interests have been redefined, making the Middle East of 2019 a different place from what it was in 2010.

The crisis pitting Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt against Qatar, the latter of which is backed by Iran and Turkey, represents other geopolitical manifestations of conflicting national interests over supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and the funding and arming of terrorists. The four-member alliance was forged at a critical and complex juncture in order to deliver an important message to collectively contend with international and regional responses to the rupture of diplomatic relations with Qatar. The wills of four major Arab states converged with the intent to act in concert on the terrain of political, diplomatic, and strategic realities, not just to defeat terrorism and those who support it, but also to restore security to the region and to establish a regional security system capable of ensuring development and prosperity for its people.

Geopolitics and Geo-economics

Fortunately, conditions now favor economic cooperation and growth that could benefit many states in the region and contribute to peace between them. Since the Egyptian House of Representatives approved a new delineation of maritime boundaries between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Saudi–Egyptian economic relations have improved. The agreement based on the Law of the Sea covers a vast area stretching from the Gulf of Aqaba in the north to the 22nd degree latitude in the south. From a purely economic perspective, both shores of the Red Sea offer potential for the creation of what will be a vast maritime security zone and mutual prosperity area.

Both “Saudi Vision 2030” and “Egyptian Vision 2030” place great emphasis on the optimum economic utilization of the Red Sea area, inclusive of the Red Sea's waters, coastlines, and islands, with all the touristic and mineral resources the sea offers and its potential to serve as a multidimensional bridge between the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt. In fact, Saudi Vision 2030 views the bridge as a means to bolster the Saudi geo-strategic position by extending it to the Eastern Mediterranean via the Suez Canal. It was no coincidence that the agreements signed during the visit by the Saudi monarch to Cairo in April 2016 included a \$1.5 billion Sinai development project and a plan to build a King Salman Mosque

in Ras Sudr on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Suez. The Saudi megacity project of “Neom” in northeastern Saudi Arabia has boundaries extending to the Sinai in Egypt and to the south of Jordan. The proposed King Salman Bridge, which would cross from Saudi Arabia over the Gulf of Aqaba to the Sinai, is a manifestation of this approach.

Egypt’s Vision 2030 converges with that of Saudi Arabia in the Sinai. Egypt has set into motion an ambitious project that by far exceeds the currently existing Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel linking Suez city—and by extension the Nile Valley—to South Sinai; the Al-Salam Bridge linking the Nile Valley to North Sinai; and the Suez-Mediterranean (SUMED) project carrying Gulf oil from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. The new project features six tunnels beneath the Suez

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Canal to facilitate the passage of people and goods via cars, trains, and other forms of transport between the two banks of the Suez. By the end of 2018, four of these tunnels had been implemented. The Suez Canal Corridor project is probably the largest development project in Egypt’s modern history. It is based on a triangle that has its tip at the ports of Port Said and Damietta in the north, while its base is demarcated by the Cairo–Ain Sokhna road where the new administrative capital will stand in close reach of the new Galala City and the Gulf of Suez. The Suez Canal and the

Damietta branch of the Nile River shape the eastern and western legs of the triangle. Below this triangle, a development is in the works to link Upper Egypt with the Red Sea by means of a network of latitudinal roads which are lined with components of the “golden triangle” project that seeks to tap the many mineral resources in that area, not to mention the huge tourist capacities centered around such Red Sea towns as Hurghada, Safaga, Quseir, and Marsa Alam.

Reforming the State

Two revolutions hit Europe simultaneously at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the French and the industrial revolutions. It was the first of these that sought to replace the old structures and political systems of European states with the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity and the Napoleonic expansion of these values to the east until the outskirts of Moscow. It was the second, the industrial revolution, however, that had an enduring impact on Europe and later the world, socioeconomically and then politically. Both were the real beginning of the modern world as we know it today.

In the Middle East, social revolutions have been ways of life from the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Palestinian intifada in 1987 to the different versions

of the Arab Spring since 2010. These revolutions were accompanied by a digital revolution in technology and communications that swept the world in the last quarter of the twentieth century, resulting in the globalization of ideas, norms, and ways of life. The Middle East was not immune to these developments. Coupled with demographic changes, the region has come under extreme pressure from the explosion of states, norms, and the balance of power.

Reform of the state and religion will therefore be necessary to build an environment that is hospitable to peaceful change, development, and progress in general. As referred to earlier, one of the major reactions to the revolutionary climate has been a strong push toward reform, not only in Egypt and Saudi Arabia in terms of visions for 2030, but also in Kuwait (which has a Vision 2035), Jordan, Tunisia, Oman, Bahrain, and Morocco. The essence of these visions is to improve ratings on major global indicators (Human Development, Competitiveness, Doing Business, and others); diversify economies, particularly in the oil producing countries; include women and minorities; penetrate underdeveloped regions; and reform religion. The most important outcomes of the emerging geopolitical and geo-economic developments in the Middle East are the emergence of common prosperity areas in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

The Red Sea Prosperity Area

Fortunately, the economic ambitions of both Egypt and Saudi Arabia's visions for 2030 favor cooperation, particularly in the Red Sea. The Saudi and Egyptian visions are complementary and furnish an immense space for mutual cooperation and success. The agreements signed between Cairo and Riyadh delineating their maritime borders in the Red Sea were the natural starting point for all this, as these agreements laid the cornerstone for political as well as economic development. If successful, the agreements will inject life into more than eighty-one islands situated in the Egyptian maritime economic zone and into a similar number on the Saudi side.

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Because of such benefits, the Cairo–Saudi agreements could become a framework for consultation and deliberation over a broad range of mutual interests and concerns. The horizons of the Saudi and Egyptian visions are broad and could lead to the declaration of a Saudi–Egyptian economic cooperation and prosperity zone in the Red Sea. Its aims would be multi-fold: firstly, to ensure the security of navigation in the Red Sea against all types of threats; secondly, to develop ambitious joint development projects starting at the Tiran and Sanafir islands, which would become a meeting point between the Egyptian and Saudi

people by means of the envisioned King Salman Bridge; and thirdly, to open a large window to long-term investment for the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and even Qatar in the future.

The upcoming Saudi mega city “Neom” hopes to cross the national boundaries of Saudi Arabia to Egypt and Jordan. Possibilities for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to get involved in the vast area for economic development will be immense. At the time of this writing, the two sides of the Red Sea are exploring gas and oil and building infrastructure for tourism on shore and on the islands of the Red Sea. The economic weight of Saudi Arabia is moving from the Gulf region in the east to the Red Sea area in the west. Likewise, in Egypt the economic focus of the country is moving from the Nile River to coastal mega-projects, which will require a mechanism for drawing up and implementing plans so that participants can maximize their economic and strategic interests.

There are, in fact, precedents to draw on, such as the SUMED oil pipeline, which stretches from Egypt’s Ain Sokhna on the Red Sea to Sidi Kerir and Alexandria on the Mediterranean, and is owned by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar. The pipeline has proven to be a superb example of successful economic cooperation. It should be remembered that projects envisioned in the Red Sea and Sinai are far more extensive in scope, cover a larger geographic area, and are more diverse in their aims. As such, the mechanism to run such regional Red Sea mega-projects could take the form of a joint council that would be responsible to the leaderships of all countries involved and would propose plans, projections, and means of implementation.

The East Mediterranean Prosperity Area

Although the state-based system in the Middle East is still fragile, the rise of the state is once more followed by the return of geopolitics, which opens opportunities for economic cooperation. Perhaps the Middle East’s common security and prosperity will depend on oil and gas, which could perform the role that coal and steel did for the European Community in the late twentieth century. It appears clear that a large degree of economic cooperation is generally instrumental to the spread of overall joint regional action in other areas.

Joint interstate mega-project developments akin to what is happening in the Red Sea region are currently also being planned for the Eastern Mediterranean. Once again, the key to regional cooperation resides in a maritime border demarcation agreement, in this case between Egypt and Cyprus. The results are, firstly, major natural gas discoveries in Egypt and Cyprus’s waters and, secondly, an agreement under which Cyprus will send its gas to Egypt to be processed, liquefied, and exported in a pipeline similar to the one that will carry the Israeli gas to Egypt.

In a related development, the Egyptian Dolphinus gas company signed a \$15 billion deal with the U.S.-based Noble Company and its Israeli partners whereby the former will receive the natural gas produced by the Israeli Tamar gas field through already existing pipes, again in order to process, liquefy, and export. A similar agreement signed by the Dutch–British giant, Shell Oil Company, is valued at \$25 billion and will have fuel flowing the same direction as the Nobel-Dolphinus agreement. ExxonMobil has also entered the playing field in the economic zone of Cyprus, which will require Exxon to extend its work to Egypt.

Discoveries of the natural gas fields “Aphrodite” (Cyprus), “Tamar” and “Leviathan” (Israel), and “Zohr” and recently “Noor” (Egypt) means there is a promise of similar fields in the territorial waters of Gaza and Lebanon. Without entering into great detail about companies, assets, and other economic and financial concerns, it is clear that oil and gas now form a basis for mutual cooperation and benefit among the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean. The launching in 2019 of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to include Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Palestine, Jordan, and Italy showed the direction of future cooperation.

Egypt is prepared to play a central role in this realm of interactions in light of its long history in petroleum transportation through the Suez Canal and, since 1977, the SUMED pipeline. In addition, Egypt now possesses two gas liquefaction plants—the Spanish Egyptian Gas Company in Damietta and the Egyptian Natural Gas Liquefaction Company in Idku—and it already possesses the largest network of gas pipelines in the region, which extend from Egypt to both Israel and Jordan. Also, Egypt is the largest market in the region for natural gas, whether for industry (most major Egyptian industries, such as the petrochemical, steel and iron, fertilizers, aluminum, and construction materials industries, are heavy energy consumers) or for domestic uses, as Egypt’s population is presently just at or slightly over 100 million persons, making it by far the largest Arab nation on the planet. Because of such factors, Egypt is poised to serve as the link between the Red Sea region and the upcoming Eastern Mediterranean zone. The Sinai will act as the crucial link in the relationship between the two seas.

Turkey’s Opposition of the Egypt–Cyprus Energy Plan

As is always the case in international and regional relations, changes generate winners

and losers and in the process, counter-movements. In this case, Turkey burst in as the self-declared defender of Northern Cyprus and refused to recognize the

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Egyptian–Cypriot agreement in 2018. The Turks have also said they champion the rights of the Palestinians, and call into question Israel’s role in the Egypt–Cyprus Plan. Meanwhile, various groups in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab region began to question the impact of such changes on the Palestinian cause. In working to understand the Turkish position, it may help to view it from geopolitical and economic perspectives.

Turkey, too, is a country bordering the Eastern Mediterranean, and the natural gas generated from the Egypt–Cyprus plan will certainly compete with the Russian natural gas that passes through Anatolia on its way to Europe. So the Turks are set to possibly lose some of the lucrative revenue that presently only flows through the Turkish hinterland to Turkey’s strategically placed ports. Yet, to understand the Turkish position against the Egypt–Cyprus energy plan does not mean one has to accept it. Northern Cyprus is not an international reality—no other country in the world recognizes it apart from Ankara—and fair competition among companies and nations is always possible with every commodity traded across borders and continents.

With regard to the impact on the Palestinian cause, there is no indication that the new changes will be detrimental to it. On the contrary, the Egypt–Cyprus energy plan might help it. Not only is there gas off the Palestinian coast, but it is also probably easier to draw the Egyptian–Palestinian and Palestinian–Israeli borders at sea than on land. At the same time, an Israel assimilated into a region of mutual prosperity might be more flexible than an Israel in a region of permanent conflict, especially if that region includes not just the Palestinians, but also the Lebanese and maybe the Syrians in the future.

Worst Probably Over

The second decade of the twenty-first century was not merciful to the Middle East region. The Arab Spring has shaken the states in the region to their very cores. What was considered a peaceful search for change and progress in 2011 had transformed by 2013 to be violent, bloody civil wars that destroyed cities and created floods of refugees. Non-state actors of sectarian and religious fanatic organizations filled the gap left by weakened states and threatened disintegration and division across the Middle East. However, as the decade is coming to a close, the regional and international response to the terrors of non-state actors in the MENA region has produced one important conclusion: despite all their deficiencies, the state structure of nations continues to be indispensable. The consensus is that that the territorial states of the Middle East should stay in their pre-revolution borders. Resolutions of intrastate conflicts and sectarian divisions are to be solved within these boundaries. The end result of this realization and affirmation has been a steady and slow revival of states that can stand and face the challenges confronting the Arab World.

As the state system starts to recover, the geopolitics of the region have begun to take shape, reflecting many of the pre-Spring national interests and interactions and contributing to a sense of stability that may bring reforms. Also, in the past five years, geopolitics have started to directly influence the geo-economics of the Middle East. The promising Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean common prosperity areas have started to emerge with Egypt's oil and gas being the linkages between these two lucrative economic spheres. However, despite the prospects of these developments, it is still too early to conclude that the Middle East is finally out of the storm. The war in Yemen, the troubles in Libya, the civil war in Syria, and the violence in Iraq are continuing reminders of the need to buttress and support the power of central governments, the rule of law, and state structures as people on the ground search for solutions to political and sectarian divisions.

Reconstruction in all of its aspects has yet to be realized. These challenges still need to be confronted, but the worst of times in the Middle East are probably over. ©