

Middle East in 2023

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Turmoil has been constant in Middle East post-Arab Spring. The history of the conflict in the region, however, goes back to decades earlier. Conflicts which were, earlier, limited to the region have now stretched to the international arena. Israel-Palestine issue and the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, played out through the series of proxy conflicts, have been defining characteristics of the region for the last several decades. Middle eastern countries and external stakeholders continue to focus on domestic politics in Iran, regional geopolitics around Yemen and Syria; while navigating Iran's nuclear issue and role of external actors such as US and China. This essay charts issues and trends that will influence Middle Eastern politics, security and stability over the next year.

Iran in the midst of Protests:

The killing of Iranian Kurdish lady Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022 provoked four-month-long demonstrations. At least 19,000 people have been imprisoned, and 500 demonstrators have been killed.¹ While the protests were the longest-lasting since Iran's Green movement in 2009, many are skeptical that they constitute a significant danger to the regime's stability. Both the security forces and the political authorities have stayed unified, and no organized opposition has emerged.² The United Nations (UN) has condemned the use of violence against protestors and the resort to death sentences (at least four people have been executed for participating in the protests). The United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United States have all imposed further sanctions on Iranians officials suspected of human rights violations. The Iranian leadership has blamed the protests on foreign interference, prompting attacks on Kurdish organizations in neighboring Iraq and the detention of foreign nationals.³ While there were early indications that the government could relax enforcement of hijab wearing, in January 2023 Iran's top court released new regulations prohibiting the removal of headscarves in public, outlining punishments of up to 10 years for anyone supporting their removal. Regardless of how the demonstrations are resolved,

¹ Commons Library, 2022 Iran protests: Human rights and international response

² Atlantic Council, A decade after Iran's Green movement, some lessons, June 2019

³ Commons Library, 2022 Iran protests: Human rights and international response,

managing Iran's economy will remain difficult. Consumer prices in November 2022 were 48% higher than the previous year, and Iranian oil is anticipated to encounter increased competition from now-sanctioned Russian exports seeking new markets.⁴

Nuclear program and foreign policy:

The talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran have been halted since September 2022, while neither Iran nor the US has stated that they have failed. While the nuclear accord is not officially on the table, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated in January 2023 that the US is dedicated to Iran never having a nuclear weapon, and other major powers hold the same position. Iran has continued to expand its uranium enrichment program throughout 2022, with enrichment up to 60% purity (the initial 2015 nuclear accord only authorized up to 3.67%). Weapons grade uranium is enriched to 90%, and a 60% enrichment level serves little civil purpose.⁵ Iran has said that the program is only for civilian objectives. While the development of a deliverable nuclear bomb is projected to take one to two years, there is growing worry that Iran would obtain irreversible nuclear knowledge, rendering any agreement or future discussions more meaningless. The international community is viewing Iran's nuclear aspirations with a different lens as they view the protests.⁶

Palestine Israel Conflict:

The new coalition government of Israel led by far-right Prime Minister Netanyahu promises to formally annex, what the international world views as illegally constructed, Israeli settlements and to "advance and develop settlement" in the Occupied West Bank.⁷ According to research by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), there is a chance that some members of the new government may aim to provoke events that would worsen the violence that is already occurring in the West Bank in 2023. Netanyahu has, however, always exercised caution when using the military force. Violence could erupt once more in Jerusalem due to tensions.⁸ The Palestinian

⁴ BBC Monitoring, What message lies behind Iran's tightening of hijab rules?, 13 January 2023

⁵ USIP Iran Primer, Iran in 2022: Cusp of nuclear threshold, 21 December 2022 and FCDO, Iran's nuclear commitments, 16 November 2022

⁶ Washington Institute, How Iran's protests differ from past movements, 28 September 2022

⁷ Netanyahu government: West Bank settlements top priority, VOA [online], 28 December 2022

⁸ IISS, Israel's new government and implications for Israel's foreign policy, November 2022

Authority will be in a weaker position in 2022, according to the UN Special Coordinator and Israeli security and defence authorities. Following a vote by the UN General Assembly in December 2022, the International Court of Justice was also asked to express an opinion on the following: Legal ramifications arising from Israel's ongoing violation of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, from its protracted occupation, settlement, and annexation of the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967.⁹ Any critical judgement from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that is not issued as an advisory opinion is likely to have more political than immediate practical consequence. In reaction to the referral, Israel declared it would refuse travel permits to select officials and withhold a portion of the tax money it receives for the Palestinian Authority. There were fresh worries about a heightened confrontation in January 2023. Nine Palestinians were lost lives during an Israeli raid to capture Islamist extremists in the Jenin refugee camp. Two of the deceased, according to Palestinian sources, were civilians.¹⁰

Arab Israel Relations:

UAE and Bahrain signed pledges to restore relations with Israel in 2020 as part of the US-led Abraham Accords. As a result of their shared worry about Iran and its nuclear program, Israel and the Gulf states may be able to advance their security cooperation. With accords on commerce and security, these have advanced. As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, Netanyahu wants to reach a deal. Several Arab governments condemned the visit of security minister Ben Gvir to the Temple Mount in January 2023, where only Muslims are permitted to pray. Netanyahu's scheduled trip to the UAE was postponed shortly after, but he did go to Jordan.¹¹ However, the 2020 accords were predicated on suspending formal annexation of parts of the Occupied West Bank.

Global Powers in the Competition:

US administrations have tried to pivot to the Asia-Pacific to compete with expanding Chinese military and economic power. US military sites in the Gulf, weaponry shipments to fight the Islamic State/Daesh, and other activities contribute significantly to US security and participation in the Arabian Gulf. Despite this, Gulf governments have sought closer ties with China and Russia

⁹ Israel-Palestinian conflict: Fears of wider flare-up, BBC News [online] 26 January 2023

¹⁰ Seven dead, three wounded in East Jerusalem synagogue shooting attack, Haaretz [online], 27 January 2023

¹¹ Netanyahu's UAE visit said postponed, Times of Israel [online], 3 January 2023

due to a variety of factors, such as a lesser emphasis on human rights than the US, a desire to diversify their economy away from the oil industry, and a desire to increase their own strategic autonomy. Presidents Joseph Biden and Xi Jinping paid the region visits in 2022. After his Administration first halted military shipments to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2021 and revealed information claiming Saudi Arabia of involvement in the death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, Biden's visit in August aimed to reset ties.¹² The focus of President Xi's trip to Saudi Arabia in December was on expanding trade, particularly in the areas of energy and oil. The visit was not perceived by analysts as posing a danger to the region's security cooperation with the US.¹³

Iran joining Sino-Russian Bloc

Although both have backed the extension of the nuclear agreement with Iran, the US's major concern in 2023 is expected to be Iran's rising security backing for Russia and economic involvement with China. Russia and China's aim to preserve and strengthen their ties with the Arab Gulf nations, which often view Iran as a destabilizing power in the area, will put pressure on the degree and depth of the partnerships between the three. The Iranian leadership may use its strategy of looking eastward as a way to avoid engaging in talks or re-engaging with the US and the EU.¹⁴ After a two-year admission period, Iran will join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a full member in April 2023.¹⁵ Russia, China, India, and Pakistan are among the members of this organization, which is largely a commercial association. In February 2023, the Iranian president also paid a state visit to China. The restrictions imposed on Iran have so far hampered commerce between that nation and both China and Russia.

Syria fostering the old ties:

Although the civil war in Syria is still ongoing, the military combat has mostly come to a standstill. While President Bashar Al-Assad was banned from the Arab League in 2011, there have been indications that relations between the president and Arab nations, particularly the UAE, Egypt,

¹² Commons Library, China and the US in the Middle East: Iran and the Arab Gulf, August 2022

¹³ Atlantic Council, What Xi Jinping's Saudi Arabia visit means for the Middle East, 9 December 2022

¹⁴ Australian Outlook, Origins and foundations of Iran's "look East" policy, 4 October 2022

¹⁵ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Iran and the SCO, November 2022

Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, are improving.¹⁶ Bashar al-Assad visited UAE in March where he met the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Muhammad Bin Maktum. He also met the president and prime minister of UAE in order to enhance the bilateral ties. He has visited UAE after 2011, and it is anticipated that the visit might help in fostering the torn ties in the region.¹⁷ Turkey has backed the Free Syrian Army in place of Assad's government. Recep Tayyab Erdogan, the president of Turkey, has suggested that the presidents of Russia, Turkey, and Syria meet in person in December 2022. It is believed that Erdogan's motivations are to facilitate the repatriation of some of Turkey's four million Syrian refugees and to ensure the isolation of the Kurdish PPU in northern Syria.¹⁸ The group is regarded as a terrorist organization by Turkey since it has ties to the Kurdish Workers' Party there. Analysts have remarked that the necessity for humanitarian help in Syria following the earthquakes in February 2023 may result in increasing interaction between some Arab governments and the Assad administration.¹⁹ For instance, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia has stated that the current situation cannot continue and that Assad must engage in discussion in order to meet the needs of refugees and the humanitarian community.

Conclusion:

Trendlines in the Middle East point towards a cautiously hopeful trajectory. Following a period of increased tension, regional nations are in the process of de-escalating, and numerous economies are exhibiting indications of post-pandemic recovery. Forecasts for the Middle East for 2023 show a significantly more nuanced picture. The geopolitics of the region have been severely compounded by the cumulative spillover consequences from Ukraine, which have also impacted the outlook for economic recovery. There are unsettling indications of socioeconomic duress throughout the region, which is fueling political unrest. The tensions in the region remain unaddressed, with escalation a possibility, however, engagement among leading regional stakeholders has been the source for infusing a degree of stability.

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¹⁶ Commons Library, Syria and its civil war: A future under Assad? November 2021, p17

¹⁷ **"Syria's Assad visits UAE in first trip to Arab state since 2011" *Al Jazeera*, Published March 2023**

¹⁸ Will Erdogan and Assad soon meet to bury the hatchet? *Al-Monitor* [online], 6 January 2023

¹⁹ Could Syria's Assad leverage earthquake to come in from the cold? *Al-Monitor* [online] 9 February 2023