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Extra-Regional Actors in the Middle East

Andrey Kortunov
Alexander Aksenok
Alexey Davydov
Lida Oganisyan
Alexander Lomanov
Alexey Kupriyanov
Ivan Bocharov

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Authors:

Andrey Kortunov, Ph.D. in History; **Alexander Aksenok**, Ph.D. in Law; **Alexey Davydov**, Ph.D. in Political Science; **Lida Oganisyan**, Ph.D. in Political Science; **Alexander Lomanov**, Doctor of History; **Alexey Kupriyanov**, Ph.D. in History; **Ivan Bocharov**

Reviewers:

Vasily Kuznetsov, Doctor of Political Science; **Viktor Smirnov**, Ph.D. in History

Editors:

Svetlana Gavrilova, Ph.D. in History (Lead Editor); **Ivan Bocharov**; **Anna Korzun**; **Katerina Trotskaya**; **Daniil Rastegaev** (Publishing Editor)

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The following report focuses on the Middle Eastern policies of extra-regional actors and their transformation in changing conditions. It concentrates on studying the strategies pursued by Russia, the U.S., the EU, China and India in the Middle East. The report also examines how Middle Eastern countries perceive extra-regional actors as they aspire to build pragmatic and balanced relationships with external partners.

The opinions expressed in this report reflect solely the personal views and analytical outlook of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Non-Profit-Making Partnership Russian International Affairs Council.

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Introduction

Andrey
Kortunov

“War is much too serious a thing to be left to military men,” as the brilliant French diplomat and statesman Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord once wisely observed. To paraphrase this now-classic statement, the Middle East is often seen as far too crucial to global interests to be left solely in the hands of regional players. The region’s affairs have always deeply concerned its many neighbors – not just those nearby, but also those considerably further afield. Unlike other world regions, the Middle East has never developed a self-contained regional system of international relations that stands isolated or even autonomous from the broader Eurasian or global framework.

Throughout history, for centuries or rather thousands of years, the Middle East has served as a battleground for powerful nations, many of which should properly be considered extra-regional actors. Conflicts between Greece and Persia, Rome and the Sassanids, Christian Europe and the Arab Caliphate, Western powers and the Ottoman Empire – these enduring and fierce struggles (which nevertheless included various forms of cooperation) invariably involved external powers, who often determined whether regional stability would be preserved or destroyed. Likewise, Middle Eastern states frequently pursued ambitions beyond their regional boundaries, aiming to extend their influence into Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the Balkans or the Iberian Peninsula.

This pattern continued throughout the 20th century, during the dissolution of colonial empires and the emergence of numerous independent nation-states across the region. After the Sykes-Picot Agreement was signed in 1916 and World War I ended in 1918, Britain and France gained direct or indirect control over virtually the entire Middle East. For several decades following World War II, the Middle East became a critical battleground in the geopolitical struggle between the U.S. and the USSR. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, the United States emerged as the region’s primary and virtually exclusive external “security provider.”

By the century’s end, America’s regional dominance might reasonably have been expected to establish a stable – though not necessarily democratic or perfectly equitable – multilateral security framework lasting for decades. However, political realities quickly shattered such expectations and hopes. Even at the height of their global influence, the United States could not achieve a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts, with the Camp David talks between Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat in July 2000 ending in failure. The March 2003 military campaign in Iraq by the U.S. and its allies caused widespread and lasting damage not only to Iraq itself but to regional stability as a whole.

Dramatic events that engulfed the region in the early 2010s, dubbed the “Arab Spring” or “Arab Awakening,” were, of course, primarily driven by internal socio-economic and political factors. One thing the Arab Spring revealed, however, was the collapse of attempts to externally manage the region, and the flawed strategy

of building a “Greater Middle East” under U.S. leadership through alliances with conservative authoritarian regional regimes. America’s standing in the region was further undermined by its failed twenty-year military campaign in Afghanistan, which concluded with a chaotic and rushed withdrawal of U.S. forces in late summer 2021.

Additionally, the U.S. role as the indispensable guarantor of regional security came into question as the “shale revolution” of the late 2000s and early 2010s freed the U.S. economy from its dependence on Middle Eastern oil, inevitably reshuffling the region’s importance in U.S. foreign policy priorities. Since the Obama administration, Washington’s strategic focus has steadily pivoted toward East Asia, with the primary threat to U.S. interests increasingly seen not as Middle Eastern terrorism but China’s expanding economic, technological and military capabilities.

Alongside these developments, the early 21st century has seen other extra-regional powers gradually increasing their political and economic footprint in the region. Some of these powers are returning to the Middle East after a period of reduced regional engagement, while others are essentially establishing a meaningful presence there for the first time. Politically, perhaps the most notable trend was Russia’s renewed presence in the region, vividly illustrated by Moscow’s direct involvement in the armed conflict in Syria on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad in autumn 2015. Russia consistently strengthened its traditional relations with leading Arab nations: Egypt, Iraq, and Algeria – and broadened cooperation with Arab Gulf states, even as it maintained its push towards a strategic partnership with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).

Around 2014, China surpassed the United States in total trade volume with the countries in the region, and the gap continued to widen steadily over the following decade. A similar trend occurred in direct investment, where China far outpaced the United States in carrying out large-scale regional infrastructure projects, primarily as part of its long-term Belt and Road Initiative to establish new transport corridors. Naturally, as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) solidified its economic foothold in the region, its political ambitions in the Middle East also gradually increased. For instance, in March 2023, China facilitated the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Middle East also grew increasingly important to India, which viewed the region’s major states as strategic partners, drawing upon substantial Indian diasporas and a long-standing history of economic and cultural ties with countries along the western Indian Ocean.

Amid growing global geopolitical tensions and rapidly escalating rivalry between great powers, it has become increasingly difficult, and in many cases impossible, for extra-regional actors to coordinate their positions even on the most fundamental regional issues. Interaction between great powers in the region increasingly resembles a “zero-sum game,” where one side’s diplomatic or economic success is automatically viewed as the other’s defeat.

This has effectively ended the activities of the Middle East Quartet that was established at the beginning of the century. No significant progress has been made in developing a comprehensive collective security system for the Persian Gulf

region. Efforts to restore the 2015 multilateral agreement on Iran's nuclear program have failed. The bitter civil war in Yemen, raging since 2014, continues unabated. Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity remain compromised. This list of setbacks could easily be extended. While in the past, even during the Cold War, the involvement of external actors could sometimes stabilize the regional situation, today their participation increasingly serves as an additional destabilizing factor that hinders mutually acceptable agreements within the region.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of external player inability to agree on a unified approach to major regional issues was their response to the unprecedented escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that began on October 7, 2023. Although the Hamas attack on the south of Israel received unanimous condemnation as an act of international terrorism – and Israel's subsequent actions in Gaza faced criticism for disproportionate and indiscriminate use of military force – the main extra-regional actors failed to secure collective decisions that could end the bloodshed.

The lack of consensus among permanent UN Security Council members has created a situation where Israel's leadership considers the damage to the country's international reputation caused by the ongoing conflict as an acceptable cost. In early October 2024, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz even declared UN Secretary General António Guterres persona non grata, demonstrating that Israel has little concern about the negative consequences of its growing international isolation.

It might be tempting to interpret the current differences among extra-regional players regarding key security and development issues in the Middle East as simply another manifestation of the larger geopolitical confrontation between East and West. However, the reality is far more complex than any simplified bipolar scheme would suggest. For instance, significant disagreements exist between the United States and European Union countries regarding Iran's nuclear program and the imposition of new sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Moreover, even within the European Union itself, there are serious internal divisions concerning the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, complicating efforts to establish a unified "European position" towards Israel and Palestine. Likewise, China and India's positions on many critical Middle East issues overlap significantly yet differ quite distinctly in certain areas.

Differences in the positions and priorities among individual extra-regional actors regarding the Middle East reflect multiple objective factors that are unlikely to change substantially in the foreseeable future. For instance, global dependence on Middle Eastern energy resources persists to varying degrees. While China, India, and the European Union continue to view the region as a key source of crucial hydrocarbons, the United States and Russia instead mainly act as competition to the Middle East in international energy markets. Similarly, the political and economic influence of Middle Eastern diasporas varies significantly in different extra-regional countries. Arab and Muslim diaspora communities are notably larger and better organized in Europe compared to the United States, and their presence in Western Europe is more significant than in Central Europe. The Indian diaspora in

the Middle East is considerably larger and generally more influential than either the Chinese or the Russian ones.

In other circumstances, such asymmetry among extra-regional actors towards the region could perhaps have been advantageous, and their different capacities for influencing regional political and economic dynamics could have naturally complemented each other. Unfortunately, no such complementarity is to be noted at present. Great power unwillingness to find common ground and reach compromises on Middle Eastern issues inevitably weakens the collective ability of extra-regional players to influence developments in the region. However, this growing detachment of the Middle East from external influence does not necessarily mean that regional powers will take on greater responsibility. As the example of Israel's current leadership shows, the absence of strict oversight from extra-regional actors can create a sense of unchecked freedom and total impunity.

Theoretically, one might assume that under these circumstances, external players would seek to minimize their involvement in Middle Eastern affairs by adopting a strategy to contain instability emanating from the region. Yet isolating the Middle East from global affairs is simply not feasible – regional instability will inevitably be felt worldwide, whether through sharp fluctuations in energy prices, surges in international terrorism or new waves of uncontrolled migration. The international community cannot simply “wall off” the Middle East, which means that addressing the region's complex security and development challenges will remain a global as well as a regional task for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, it would be no exaggeration to say that a stable and prosperous Middle East could play a significant role in tackling security and development challenges not only in neighboring regions but also globally. The Middle East is more than just a source of oil and gas. The region boasts substantial demographic, economic, technological and other resources and can make a unique contribution to solving many common challenges facing humanity, including climate management, combating political extremism, advancing artificial intelligence and preserving biodiversity. This is why meaningful and constructive international engagement in Middle Eastern affairs is not an act of political charity but an investment in a shared future. One way or another, the key extra-regional and regional players will sooner or later have to agree on a set of common – if not necessarily legally binding – rules of the game in the Middle East, and the ability to reach such agreements will be a crucial criterion for future regional and global leadership.

The recent dramatic events in Syria have once again raised the question of the extent of responsibility great powers have in the Middle East situation. The shock of what is happening in Syria is quite comparable to, if not exceeding, the emotional impact of the Hamas attack on southern Israel on October 7, 2023. The two stages of the regional crisis are closely linked: it would not be an exaggeration to say that December 2024 became a direct, albeit delayed, continuation of October 2023. The political map of the Middle East is again changing dramatically, requiring both Damascus's immediate neighbors and extra-regional players to redefine

their objectives and priorities, hopes and fears regarding the former Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) and the Middle East as a whole.

Of course, one can always claim that Syria's fate ultimately depends on Syrians themselves. However, the reality is that for many years the country has remained an arena of fierce international confrontation, where powerful foreign partners and sponsors stand behind each Syrian political and military force. Therefore, the role of external factors in the emerging post-Assad political transition cannot be underestimated.

Some in the international expert community believe that regional powers should play a decisive role in determining Syria's future, as they suffer the most from current Syrian instability and would benefit the most from a successful Syrian political transition. However, it must be acknowledged that none of these states possesses either sufficient military and economic resources or the requisite political will to take responsibility for the future of Syrian statehood. Therefore, the approach taken by Syria's neighbors will inevitably be dictated primarily by opportunistic interests and will shift according to the changing situation within Syria. Agreements between regional players on Syrian issues are quite possible, but they will more often be tactical rather than strategic in nature. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the interests of the main regional players regarding Syria not only fail to align but frequently stand in direct opposition to one another.

For Turkey, it is crucial to maintain maximum influence over the new leadership in Damascus, repatriate at least some of the numerous Syrian refugees currently on Turkish soil and, if possible, prevent the establishment of a radical Islamist state right on its doorstep. Recep Erdogan would likely feel much more comfortable if Damascus were entered by units of the Turkish-loyal Syrian National Army rather than the far less controllable militants of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.* An even more important objective for the Turkish Republic is to secure the surrender and subsequent complete elimination of Syrian Kurdish formations in the north of the country; Ankara believes these groups pose existential threats not only to Syria but also to Turkey itself.

Israel's priority remains inflicting irreparable damage on Syria's remaining military capabilities. Additionally, Benjamin Netanyahu aims to completely expel Iran from Syria and permanently secure the Syrian Golan Heights for Israel. Israel is also concerned about Turkey gaining excessive influence in Syria and the prospect of the country becoming a kind of "Turkish protectorate," which many Israeli politicians believe could sooner or later lead to direct Turkish-Israeli military confrontation. Israel is also dissatisfied with Turkey's harsh actions against Syrian Kurds.

Iran is forced to minimize damage to its interests and to the position of Syria's Shiite minority, while seeking opportunities to support Tehran's ally Hezbollah, as Israel systematically destroys the long-functioning land bridge to Lebanon. Tehran cannot help but feel concerned about the strengthening of both Turkish and Israeli positions in Syria.

* An organization whose activities are banned in Russia.

Iraq needs to be wary of the destabilizing impact of Syrian events on its eastern regions. The common border between the two countries, through which a flow of refugees is now passing, including former Syrian army personnel, stretches for nearly 600 kilometers. The same concerns about potential cross-border spillover of Syrian instability should trouble the Lebanon's Prime Minister and the King of Jordan.

Great powers are great precisely because they cannot afford the luxury of situational opportunism. By definition, they must think strategically. To emphasize once more: this is far from the best time to seek consensus between them, as the entire world is in a state of fierce geopolitical confrontation. Nevertheless, if to set aside political rhetoric, the interests of the great powers regarding a post-Assad Syria largely coincide.

First, no one is interested in Syria breaking up into several mini-states. Not only because these mini-states would likely prove unviable, but also because disrupting the territorial status quo could trigger a chain reaction of border revisions across the Middle East with unpredictable yet extremely dangerous consequences.

Second, none of the responsible players stands to gain from Syria becoming a new major hotbed of political extremism and international terrorism at the very heart of the Arab world. The tragic fate of Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime by Washington and its allies in the spring of 2003 should serve as a warning to all. A repetition of the Iraqi events from twenty years ago in today's Syria would harm everyone – not only Damascus's immediate neighbours but also overseas great powers.

Third, it is in everyone's common interest to prevent the restoration of chemical weapons capabilities that Damascus once possessed, and which were destroyed under the Russian-American agreement reached in September 2013. The possibilities for resuming chemical weapons production in Syria are not entirely clear, but concerns in this regard still exist.

Fourth, there is a shared interest in ensuring that the vast and diverse arsenals of conventional weapons accumulated by all participants in the years-long civil war in this country do not fall into the hands of irresponsible extremist groups, whether inside the country or beyond its borders. Israel is currently addressing this task partially through forceful means, but the Jewish state can hardly accomplish this alone, especially by using exclusively military force. Fifth, it is important for everyone to prevent the prospect of a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe in Syria caused by shortages of food, fuel and basic medicines, the collapse of state and municipal governance systems, persistent pockets of armed violence, increased activity of criminal groups and other factors.

Sixth, everyone would like to hope that the new political regime will be inclusive, that Syria will soon have a modern constitution, and that the new political system will find a place for representatives of all ethnic and religious groups in Syria's complex society. No one would wish to see the onset of an era of medieval gender discrimination and segregation in Syria.

Seventh, it is in everyone's interest to prevent a new wave of migration from Syria that could overwhelm neighboring countries and reach other regions. Moreover, it would be desirable for at least some of the eight million Syrian refugees currently in the Middle East, Europe and elsewhere to return home and participate in rebuilding their country devastated by civil war.

Eighth, there is a shared interest in post-Assad Syria continuing its process of returning to the family of Arab states, which is already underway, ultimately ceasing to be one of the numerous problems of the Arab world and becoming a constructive participant in building a new system of regional security and development.

Are these common interests sufficient to separate Syria from the negative global geopolitical context? Sceptics will undoubtedly say that all this is insufficient and that further developments in the country will inevitably be seen in Brussels and Moscow, Washington and Beijing as a zero-sum game. Indeed, under the current circumstances, it is difficult to expect the adoption of any long-term multilateral programs for the country's post-conflict reconstruction or even the coordination of a detailed roadmap to assist state-building in Syria at the UN Security Council. Even less likely is the launch of a Syrian "quartet" or "quintet" modelled after the alliance of Russia, the U.S., the UN and the European Union, which was created in 2002 to coordinate efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, conclusions should not be rushed: the closed UN Security Council meeting on Syria held on December 9, 2024, demonstrated rare unity in today's world regarding the fundamental approaches of the great powers to the events unfolding in the country. Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, emphasized that this commonality of positions extends to issues of "preserving the territorial integrity and unity of Syria, ensuring the protection of civilians, ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid to the population in need."¹

Of course, unity may prove fragile and short-lived. The main external players in the Syrian conflict are burdened by a long history of mutual grievances, claims, suspicions and disagreements, preventing any of them from emerging as a natural and legitimate leader in national reconciliation efforts. On the other hand, the effective withdrawal of the great powers from the Syrian problem, summed up by U.S. President Donald Trump's formula – "This is not our fight. Let it play out. Do not get involved!" – effectively delegitimizes great powers as leading responsible players in world politics. One of the inherent characteristics of a great power is the ability and willingness to provide global and regional public goods and to take responsibility for solving complex problems that prove insurmountable for other players in world politics.

In the current environment, the initiative for joint efforts to prevent negative scenarios for further developments in Syria could come from those leading "global majority" states that were not directly involved in the military confrontation. For

¹ Nebenzya Speaks about the UN Security Council's Position on the Situation in Syria // RBC. December 10, 2024.
URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/675770319a79472052853aa6>

instance, China or India could put forward proposals to create a multilateral platform for post-conflict reconstruction projects in Syria. The UN Security Council's endorsement of such a format would be an important incentive not only for national economic assistance programs but also for private investors from the European Union, East Asia and the Gulf states. At the same time, the more active involvement of Global South leaders in stabilizing the situation in Syria and preventing the country from becoming another failed state would be a clear confirmation of the changing status of the Global South in the international system, an important step in shaping a new, more just and representative world order.

The current situation in Syria remains extremely unstable and fluid. The balance between moderates and radicals, between pragmatists and ideologues, between tolerance and intolerance, between order and chaos, between civil peace and civil war, could shift at any moment. The coming months and even weeks may prove decisive in determining the country's development path for many years to come.

It is precisely at such turning points in history that the ability of great powers to live up to their special status in world politics is tested in practice. One would hope that they will rise to the challenges they face.

In a new report by the Russian International Affairs Council, leading Russian experts analyze the strategic approaches to the Middle East region of such "traditional" extra-regional players as Russia, the United States and the European Union, as well as relatively new ones – China and India; they also consider how these approaches are perceived within the region itself. The report's sections reflect both long-term trends in the strategies of extra-regional actors in the Middle East and their responses to recent events in the region, including Israel's military operations in Gaza and southern Lebanon, attacks by Yemeni Houthis on ships in the Red Sea, missile exchanges between Israel and Iran and numerous international mediation attempts. It is hoped that this publication will be useful for international affairs experts, students and teachers, journalists and diplomats, as well as anyone interested in the dynamics of the Middle East – one of the most complex and least predictable regions in the modern world.

Russia's Main Middle East Policy Priorities

Alexander
Aksenenok

Throughout Russia's history, the Middle East has been, for various reasons, if not a priority, then a crucial direction of its foreign policy and military strategy. This includes enduring geopolitical, religious, cultural and civilizational factors. Both in imperial and Soviet times, Russian authorities had to focus political activity and significant military forces on its southern borders due to their great length and security threats, not only from neighboring states but also from Western powers. Moreover, this region has always been viewed as part of Central Asia, which is territorially and strategically connected to Russia. Spiritual ties with fellow believers in the Middle East, the large area of indigenous Muslim population in Russia itself and, of course, long-standing trade and economic interests have also played a significant role.

Russia's modern Middle East policy in the 20th and first quarter of the 21st centuries can be divided into three stages. Each has its own significant characteristics related to shifts in Russia's internal political development and transformations in global politics.

Throughout the period of bipolar confrontation, the Soviet leadership viewed relations with the Middle East region through the lens of geopolitical rivalry with the United States. Ideology at the time was a key criterion in decision-making, often leading to disagreements within the highest echelons of power, particularly between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In official discourse, the struggle between the two systems for spheres of influence was theoretically justified by the concept of "socialist orientation," which divided the Arab world into "reactionary" monarchies supporting the United States and so-called socialist-oriented states. However, "Arab socialism" was significantly different from the Soviet model, except perhaps for the South Yemeni advocates of "scientific socialism."

From today's perspective, it is clear that ideological pressure in foreign policy underpinned a whole series of mistakes that allowed Henry Kissinger to outmaneuver the Soviet Union with his "step-by-step" tactics, as Moscow "consistently" advocated for a "comprehensive settlement" of the Arab-Israeli conflict and condemned "separate deals."

An interesting explanation of the U.S. policy to exclude the Soviet Union from the peace process is provided by prominent U.S. diplomat Harold Saunders, the architect of the Camp David Accords. He once worked closely with Yevgeny Primakov within the Working Group on Regional Conflicts, established on the sidelines of "second track" diplomacy – the Dartmouth Conference.

Harold Saunders noted three reasons for pursuing a policy of excluding the USSR from the peace process. The first reason was Moscow's interest in supporting the Arab position rather than achieving progress in peace negotiations, which would have required taking Israeli interests into account as well. The second reason was

that U.S. negotiators viewed Soviet diplomacy as overly formalistic, preventing it from adapting quickly to changing situations and operating effectively under new conditions. The third reason lay in Washington's ambitions during the "Kissinger era," when achieving and demonstrating strategic superiority over the USSR was one of America's priorities.

During this same period, the USSR implemented major industrial projects in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Algeria and Yemen, sent technical and military specialists to Arab countries and developed cultural contacts, which established a solid foundation for further cooperation with Middle Eastern countries.

Bilateral economic cooperation also took the shape of issuing loans to countries in the region, primarily in the military-technical sphere. At the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, a significant portion of the debt from Asian and African countries was owed by some Arab states.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia reduced its political activity in the region and weakened its economic positions in the Middle East, partly due to domestic political upheavals and the financial crisis of those years. At the same time, the diminished attention to the Middle East and generally to countries of the "third world" (as they were termed at that time) was equally caused by a sharp, largely improvised foreign policy shift from confrontation with the West to an obsession with Western relations, even including illusions about a possible "strategic partnership" with the United States.

Russia's return to the Middle East in the first decade of the 21st century and the gradual restoration of the traditional balance of power occurred under different circumstances. Russia began to prioritize the protection of national interests over systemic rivalry and the "ideologies" of the past. Russian diplomacy started to reclaim lost ground, drawing on all the experience accumulated in relations with Arab countries.

Russia adjusted its approach to building cooperation with Arab states and began to develop relations across a wide range of various fields, guided by pragmatic considerations, primarily in the areas of economics and regional security. On this basis, constructive cooperation with traditional partners like Algeria, Egypt and Iraq gained new momentum, and engagement was established with members of the Saudi Arabia-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which were rapidly gaining economic and political weight.

A unique role in relations with Arab countries was played by the fact that Russia was never perceived as a colonial power, unlike many Western states. Support for national liberation movements in Middle Eastern states earned their respect, despite the end of the Pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism era in the region.

Russia demonstrated a unique ability to maintain constructive relations with opposing sides in regional conflicts, as well as acting as a mediator between opposing actors – Saudi Arabia and Iran, Syria and Turkey, Iran and Turkey, Syrian Kurds and the ruling regime in Damascus, and rival Palestinian organizations. The partnership with Iran increasingly took on the character of an alliance, while in

relations with Turkey, compromises were always found despite existing disagreements, albeit with considerable difficulty. All this shaped a new image of Russia in the region even before 2011, when mass protests triggered a chain reaction of regime changes and civil wars. The Arab world, as it seemed then, entered a period of systemic shocks.

By that time, Russia had managed to partially regain its lost positions and, on this basis, maintained a policy of flexible response to unexpected turns during the Arab Spring, while demonstrating persistence and consistency in relations with regional players on issues concerning its direct interests. Maintaining such a line of conduct contributed to the growth of Russia's influence not only in the Middle East but on the international stage as a whole.

Despite the unpredictability of such a massive destabilization of the region, Russia's direct military involvement in Middle Eastern political processes was not only dictated by regional considerations. Global strategic priorities were of significant importance – restoring Russia's status as a world power without resorting to confrontation.

The Arab Spring did not become a contentious issue in the relations between Russia and Western countries, despite some differences in the assessment of these events. The United States and several European states traditionally ideologized the Arab revolutions, while Russia supported not democratic slogans but the legitimate aspirations of Arab peoples and their right to a better life. At the same time, Russia emphasized the need to solve problems through dialogue and the inadmissibility of foreign interference in internal political processes. Russian diplomacy developed its own approach and did not view the Arab Spring events in black and white, as some other countries did.

The internationalization of the Libyan conflict, which was one manifestation of the Arab Spring, made its resolution more difficult. Since UN Security Council Resolution No. 1973 allowed the use of force but did not define its limits and conditions, Western countries were able to influence the dynamics of the civil conflict and change the situation in favor of the armed opposition.

Russia viewed the Libyan processes as yet another manifestation of the trend towards interventionism and the prioritization of force and subsequently took a hard stance in the discussions and votes on the situation in Syria. Initially, from 2011 to 2016, Russia's military-political support for the Syrian regime caused significant friction in its relations with a group of Arab states and Turkey – proponents of regime change tactics through external intervention on the opposition's side. The subsequent development of the Syrian conflict demonstrated the validity of Russia's arguments.

The Russian Aerospace Forces, at the invitation of the legitimate government of the Syrian Arab Republic, successfully conducted an operation in the country and were prepared to coordinate international efforts to combat the terrorist threat. Had the American coalition heeded calls for cooperation in fighting terrorism, this precedent could have positively influenced the entire regional situation.

As Russia's decisive actions strengthened the Syrian government and the armed opposition increasingly fell under the influence of militant Islamists, Saudi Arabia began to assess the prospects of the situation with increasing realism. Despite existing disagreements, interaction between Russia and the Arab Gulf states was built on common interests in regional and global politics. Russia's principled support for Syria was positively evaluated by Saudi Arabia, especially compared to what Arabs considered the ambiguous policy of the United States, which did not stand by Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 events in Egypt. However, in the years that followed, Bashar al-Assad's inability to negotiate with the Syrian opposition and his reluctance to heed Russia's persistent advice to seek rapprochement with Turkey contributed to the devaluation of accumulated political capital.

The economic interests of Russian businesses in the Middle East became an important foreign policy element. Although trade volume remained small until the 2000s, it began to grow from 2008 onwards. By 2023, trade turnover with the Middle East and North Africa reached \$95 billion.²

Trade and economic relations with traditional partners, including Algeria and Egypt, flourished. In 2022, bilateral trade with Algeria increased by 70%.³ Positive developments also occurred in business partnerships with Egypt. For instance, an agreement was signed to provide Russian companies with an industrial zone for investment.⁴ Russian-Egyptian cooperation is also advancing in the energy sector. Beyond collaboration in oil and gas, cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy is expanding. For example, the Russian company Rosatom is constructing the El Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant in Egypt.

Trade with the Arab Gulf states grew the most, with turnover increasing from \$3.7 billion in 2013 to \$9.3 billion in 2022.⁵ Russian exports account for 90% of trade between the countries, primarily consisting of energy products, metals, timber, grain and fertilizers. Equipment exports over this period also increased, but only slightly, by no more than 10%. Russian company participation in the construction of energy facilities and capital projects in Gulf countries, as well as the implementation of investment projects in the oil and gas sector, holds a special place in technical cooperation.

It is important to note that over the past two decades, Russia has become a leading grain exporter. According to the UN, Russia accounts for 34.4% of grain supplies to the Middle East and North Africa. The largest importers among Arab countries are: Sudan (90%), Egypt (60.4%) and Yemen (26.7%).⁶

² Russia's Trade with Middle East and North Africa Soaring — Minister // RT. May 14, 2023. URL: <https://www.rt.com/africa/576131-russia-middle-east-africa-trade/>

³ Maxim Reshetnikov: "Algeria is one of our most important allies in Africa" (in French: Maxim Reshetnikov: «L'Algérie est l'un de nos alliés les plus importants en Afrique») // Algérie Patriotique. June 14, 2023. URL: <https://www.algeriepatriotique.com/2023/06/14/maxim-reshetnikov-lalgerie-est-lun-de-nos-allies-les-plus-importants-en-afrique/>

⁴ Russia and Egypt Sign Agreement to Establish a Russian Industrial Zone in Egypt // Ministry of Industry and Trade of Russia. May 23, 2018. URL: <https://minpromtorg.gov.ru/press-centre/news/40b91a1b-86ad-4609-8c21-04baa0327d5b>

⁵ Macroeconomic and Financial Data // International Monetary Fund Direction of Trade Statistics. URL: <https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61013712>

⁶ The Impact of the Ukraine War on the Arab Region: Food Insecurity in an Already vulnerable Context // Arab Reform Initiative. March 11, 2022. URL: <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-impact-of-the-ukraine-war-on-the-arab-region-food-insecurity-in-an-already-vulnerable>

Arab states remain important buyers of Russian weapons. Following the successes of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria, Russia's share in arms exports to the Middle East has increased. Between 2016 and 2020, Russia and Algeria signed contracts worth \$4.2 billion, making Algeria Russia's third-largest partner in this field after India and China.⁷ Since 2019, this list has expanded to include countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar.

One of Russia's key priorities in Middle Eastern policy is resolving security issues in the Persian Gulf. As confrontation in the region intensifies, Russia's security concept for this part of the world has gained particular relevance today.

In the energy sector, cooperation within the OPEC+ framework since 2019 has become so stable that it can reasonably be described as a strategic partnership. Central to the operation of this mechanism is the coordination of positions between Russia and Saudi Arabia, allowing OPEC+ countries to regulate energy prices on the global market.

Another Russian company, Sroytransgaz, successfully fulfilled its obligations to build a 217 km oil pipeline and a 900 km water pipeline in Saudi Arabia. LUKOIL's project for the exploration and development of a gas and gas condensate field is nearing completion. About 40 Russian company representatives and over 300 joint ventures operate in the UAE, including in industrial manufacturing, trade, hospitality, tourism, freight transport and real estate.⁸

In the Persian Gulf region, where major financial centers are located and grand economic diversification programs are underway, Russian businesses have investment cooperation prospects. In 2011, the Russian Direct Investment Fund was established, focusing on mutually beneficial cooperation with major sovereign wealth funds of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE and Bahrain. From 2011 to 2022, Arab investor capital was successfully directed under state guarantees into important sectors of the Russian economy such as infrastructure, stock market, energy, medicine and information technology.

The development of diverse relations with Russia by regional states is particularly important in the context of their desire to pursue independent policies and diversify their connections with the outside world.

Middle Eastern countries keenly feel the negative consequences of the new spiral of global confrontation in achieving their development goals. It undermines stable links in the global economy and finance, hampering normal international cooperation in addressing cross-border issues. The response of regional leaders to the escalation in relations between Russia and the West shows their interest in developing a new format for interaction on the international stage and demonstrates that ideological centers of attraction no longer exist in the world. There is a clear

⁷ Infographic: Which Countries Buy the Most Russian Weapons? // Al Jazeera. March 9, 2022.
URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/9/infographic-which-countries-buy-the-most-russian-weapons>

⁸ Lukin, A.V. *New International Relations: Main Trends and Challenges for Russia*. Moscow: International Relations, 2018. 592 p.; Aksemenok, A.G. The Middle East: At the Turning Point of Epochs. In: *New International Relations: Main Trends and Challenges for Russia*. Moscow: International Relations, 2018. P. 411.

desire among Middle Eastern countries to create favorable conditions for solving their internal problems without foreign interference.

The Middle East is no longer what it was two or three decades ago. It has transformed itself from a geopolitical object into a significant geopolitical actor. Most Middle Eastern states do not accept American dictates, refusing to join Western sanctions related to the situation in Ukraine and maintaining neutrality, thus engaging in a balancing act. This is why the emergence of a multipolar world through global confrontation has not significantly influenced Russia's political position in the Middle East. Evidence of this includes, among other things, several regional countries joining the BRICS format.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that as the confrontation in Ukraine continues, Russia is beginning to face difficulties in its Middle Eastern endeavors. The current political uncertainty and Western sanctions are objectively hampering the development of Russian-Arab relations in the trade, economic and investment spheres. Most Middle Eastern countries have special partnerships with the United States and cannot resist their pressure due to the threat of secondary sanctions.

Trade with the UAE grew by 68% in 2022,⁹ however, by early 2024, two of Moscow's key regional economic partners – Turkey and the UAE – began to restrict payment operations with Russian counterparts. Arab investment funds were also forced to freeze their activities.

Military-technical cooperation has also decreased. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), arms supplies to the Middle East from Western countries increased from 62% to 72% between 2019 and 2023, while Russia's share fell by 53% during the same period.¹⁰

All and all, despite Russia's direct military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict and reputational losses due to the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Russian diplomacy maintains its ability to pursue a multi-vector political course in the Middle East.

Under unprecedented pressure from Israel, Arab states are trying to preserve the framework of regional détente that emerged before the tragic events of October 7, 2023. Iran is showing restraint, avoiding direct escalation with Israel. Security contacts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, including for the first time at the defense minister level, continue as before. Egypt, Qatar and the UAE are involved in mediation missions attempting to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza, while Oman facilitates the establishment of a closed communication channel between Iran and the United States. Multilateral diplomatic mechanisms are now operational within the Arab League, Arab-Islamic summits and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi

⁹ Trade Turnover between Russia and the UAE Increased to \$9 Billion in 2022 // TASS. February 20, 2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17094049>

¹⁰ European Arms Imports Nearly Double, U.S. and French Exports Rise, and Russian Exports Fall Sharply // SIPRI. March 11, 2024. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/european-arms-imports-nearly-double-us-and-french-exports-rise-and-russian-exports-fall-sharply>

Arabia has announced the beginning of work to create an international coalition aimed at establishing a Palestinian state.¹¹

In the midst of a new phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkey has emerged as a leading actor in the Middle East. Over the past two years, Recep Erdogan has managed to make a difficult pivot towards the Arab world, resulting in normalized bilateral relations and high-level contacts with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. At the same time, Turkey has taken a number of steps towards its Arab partners, restricting the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood* and associated media outlets within its territory and expelling active members of the movement.¹² The Gaza crisis has accelerated Turkey's rapprochement with multilateral Arab organizations such as the Arab League and GCC, elevating their interaction to a new level with a focus on "regional solutions to regional problems."

Regardless of how the issue of Russia's military presence in Syria is resolved and how events unfold in that country, the change of power in Damascus presents new opportunities for Moscow. Firstly, Russia's policy in the Middle East is no longer tied to an Arab "ally" rapidly losing international legitimacy. Secondly, Russia has experience dealing with political Islamist movements, including those listed as terrorist organizations. This was the case with Algeria in the 1990s, with Egypt during Mohammed Morsi's presidency in 2012–2013 and with Afghanistan. Finally, despite a decline in its military leverage, Russia remains an important player in Middle Eastern multilateral diplomacy, and any government in Syria will have to take this into account. Under these circumstances, international efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict could become a point of convergence for the interests of many countries and gain new momentum.

However, it must be noted that as global processes develop along confrontational lines, Middle Eastern states recognize that Russia's economic and financial base does not fully match the global ambitions of its foreign policy. It must also be considered that the Middle East is not anti-West: deep disappointment with the "double standards" in United States policy in the high-tech age inevitably coexists with the vital necessity and interest in continuing close cooperation with them in many areas.

¹¹ Riyadh is Forming an International Coalition to Implement the Palestine-Israel Resolution // TASS. September 27, 2024.
URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/21978551>

¹² Turkey in MENA, MENA in Turkey // Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. March 15, 2024.
URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP03/>

* An organization whose activities are banned in Russia.

U.S. Middle East Policy

Alexey
Davydov

The election of Joe Biden as President of the United States in 2021 heralded a new phase in U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East. For more than half a century, and especially in recent decades, Washington's involvement in the region's development has been not only highly significant but also fundamental in several areas. For much of the second half of the 20th century, the Middle East was seen by the U.S. as a theatre for countering Soviet expansion, particularly as national liberation movements developed, and nation-states were established in the region. After the end of the Cold War and especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States, one administration after another, began to formulate separate, specifically Middle Eastern strategies within its foreign policy framework.

With the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the reduced influence of transnational terrorist groups Al-Qaeda* and ISIS,* and the reorientation of the U.S. global strategy due to changes in the nature of international challenges, the Biden administration became the first in two decades not to present its own vision for Middle East policy.¹³ The primary focus of the Democratic administration has been the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the risk of escalation around Taiwan, and further countering China's influence. Even the sudden and rapid escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict did not lead to the creation of a new Middle Eastern strategy by the United States during this electoral cycle.

By the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, the familiar picture of the Middle East's priority status in American foreign policy had transformed and was taking on new shapes. The rivalry with Moscow and Beijing shifted the region out of Washington's primary focus, raising several pertinent questions. What new directions has the U.S. adopted in its approach to its Middle East foreign policy? How accurate is it to claim that Middle Eastern issues are steadily moving to the periphery of U.S. foreign policy strategy? Does the region remain strategically significant for Washington? To address these questions, the evolution of the Middle East's priority within the U.S. foreign policy strategy must be examined, as well as its current and potential directions through the end of the 2020s outlined.

Evolution of U.S. Middle East Priorities

Although U.S. relations with Middle Eastern countries have deep roots dating back to the first half of the 19th century, the region only started to take center stage in U.S. foreign policy from the mid-20th century, with U.S. interest reaching its peak at the beginning of the 21st century. From the inception of its pre-World War II foreign policy, the White House was primarily interested in Middle Eastern states as new markets for international trade. Washington occasionally showed bursts of interest for more tactical reasons: notably, due to the infringement of

¹³ Davydov, A. On the New Quality of the U.S. Middle East Policy. In: Russia: arms control, disarmament and international security. Moscow: IMEMO, 2022. P. 117–134.

* An organization whose activities are banned in Russia.

U.S. rights, particularly those of Jewish and Armenian origin in Turkey at the turn of the 19–20th centuries,¹⁴ or attempts to station U.S. military contingents in the Republic of Armenia after World War I.¹⁵

Two factors contributed to the change in this approach in the mid-20th century. First, the United States needed to secure more favorable and reliable access to hydrocarbons in the region and help undermine French and UK positions, who were then key competitors of the U.S. Second, the Cold War served as a catalyst for building relations with Middle Eastern countries.

To curb the expansion of Soviet influence in the region and prevent the USSR from advancing towards the oil-rich areas of the Persian Gulf, the United States began establishing a system of military alliances with Middle Eastern states. At this historical juncture, the degree of democratic governance in the region's political regimes was not a priority for the U.S. The main threat was the potential for Moscow to seize the initiative in supporting national liberation movements and newly independent states in their initial stages of formation and search for national identity.¹⁶ Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the CENTO bloc (which included Iraq, Pakistan and pre-revolution Iran before 1979), as well as Egypt under Anwar Sadat became key regional allies for the U.S. These countries served not only as a springboard for promoting U.S. interests in the region but also as markets for U.S. weapons.¹⁷

However, there was also a qualitatively different, closer alliance in the region – the U.S.–Israel partnership. The relationship between the United States and Israel was built on a deeper foundation, which, beyond military-strategic cooperation, included economic, social, and to some extent even religious-ideological components, markedly different from relations with other Middle Eastern partners. As the Arab-Israeli conflict evolved, especially after the Six-Day War of 1967, the United States became increasingly convinced that Israel was a strong and loyal regional power with which close relations should be developed. Nevertheless, the United States refrained from entering a legally binding military or defensive alliance with Israel, in order to preserve its existing system of alliances with Arab states and maintain formal neutrality in dealings with other regional partners.¹⁸

Events such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988, and especially the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the USSR, reshaped the strategic imperatives of the United States and ushered in a new phase within the

¹⁴ For example, see: Cleveland, G. Fourth Annual Message (second term) // The American Presidency Project. December 7, 1896.

URL: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/fourth-annual-message-second-term>;

McKinley, W. Third Annual Message // The American Presidency Project. December 5, 1899.

URL: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/third-annual-message-15>

¹⁵ Davydov, A. The South Caucasus in the Strategic Focus of the U.S. *Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. 2023. No. IV (LXI). Pp. 185–199.

¹⁶ Davydov, A. "Democracy Promotion" by the U.S. – Concept and Practice. In: *Middle East: Politics and Identity*. Moscow: Aspect-Press Publishing, 2024. Pp. 261–275.

¹⁷ Kislov, A.S. "U.S. Middle East Policy". In: *Modern U.S. Foreign Policy*. Moscow: Nauka, 1984. Vol. 2. Pp. 252–278.

¹⁸ Davydov, A.A., Samarskaia, L.M. The U.S. – Israel "Special Relations": Structural Foundations and Trump Factor. *World Economy and International Relations*. 2020. Vol. 64. No. 10. Pp. 40–51.

U.S. regional policy. Globally, an expansionist strategy was established,¹⁹ though this trend was not as evident in the Middle East strategy at the end of the 20th century. The United States was more focused on maintaining stability in the region to safeguard its own interests in the energy sector and uphold security, including the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.²⁰ Meanwhile, issues related to the internal political structure of Middle Eastern countries, programs for democratizing their institutions and protecting human rights remained marginal in overall U.S. foreign policy practices.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks brought about a fundamental change in the U.S. strategic vision for the Middle East. The establishment of international terrorism as a central threat in U.S. foreign policy occurred alongside evolving perceptions of its genesis. Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the U.S. political establishment developed a skepticism towards the nature of Islamist and nationalist movements and the political regimes in the Middle East, as they came to be associated with trends destabilizing Washington's foreign policy in the region. Furthermore, after the change of Russia's position in 1991, U.S. elites began to feel more confident about imposing democratic models of social development on third countries by any means, including military force.²¹ The combination of psychological stress in U.S. society due to the attacks, shifting perspectives among the U.S. elite and the historical moment led to the most intensive growth in the strategic attention of the U.S. to the region and its involvement in Middle Eastern issues and affairs.

Direct U.S. involvement in the political processes of countries in the region occurred during military campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. If this departure from the traditional conservative approach to regional intervention towards a sharply proactive influence on its development brought any positive results at all, it did so only in the short term. Meanwhile, the qualitative results of this foreign policy course began to lag significantly behind the costs that the United States incurred due to such involvement in regional processes. The violent overthrow of the governments of Iraq and Libya through direct intervention by U.S. armed forces and their allies, as well as attempts since 2011 to topple the Syrian authorities, led to an escalation of internal contradictions in these countries, societal divisions and civil wars,²² weakening of state institutions and, consequently, the expansion of international terrorism in the form of ISIS.*²³

¹⁹ Clinton, W. Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on Administration Goals // The American Presidency Project. February 17, 1993.

URL: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-congress-administration-goals>

²⁰ American Objectives in the Middle East // The U.S. Department of State. June 14, 1996.

URL: <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/nea/960514.html>

²¹ Davydov, A. On the New Quality of the U.S. Middle East Policy. *Russia: Arms Control, Dismament and International Security*. 2022. Pp. 122–128.

²² Mamedov, R.Sh. *Iraq in the Early 21st Century: On the Path to a New Statehood*. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2023. 256 p.

²³ Davydov, A.A. The Rise of ISIS* as a Result of U.S. Policy on "Democracy Promotion". In: B.A. Shiryayev, N.A. Tsvetkova et al. (eds.) *XXV Russian-American Seminar at St. Petersburg State University*. St. Petersburg: Skifiya, 2016. Pp. 63–69.

* An organization whose activities are banned in Russia.

Relations with traditional U.S. allies in the region also fell into crisis. The deterioration of understanding with Egypt occurred due to Washington's refusal to support President Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring and accusations of authoritarianism against the country's new leader Abdel Fattah el-Sisi; with Israel due to criticism regarding its settlement policy; with Saudi Arabia due to pressure on journalists and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi; and with Turkey due to dissatisfaction over its purchase of the S-400 system from Russia and allegations about Ankara's interference in the internal affairs of European NATO allies.

Twenty years of the internationally legitimate presence of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan and their attempts to reconstruct the country through unprecedented levels of aid resulted in the Afghan population remaining in dire straits and the Taliban returning to power in Kabul.²⁴

The outcome of active U.S. involvement in regional processes was that the U.S. establishment began to abandon the idea of "nation-building" in third countries.²⁵ Its policy in the Middle East in the early 2020s became largely reactive, and the region itself ended up on the periphery of Washington's attention.

Donald Trump's Return and Prospects for the U.S. Middle East Policy

The unexpectedly decisive Republican victory in the 2024 presidential election creates an opportunity for implementing a qualitatively new foreign policy approach towards the Middle East over the next four years. For newly elected President Trump, this second term will be his last, allowing him to pursue a more active foreign policy without closely considering voter preferences. Furthermore, his room for maneuver is expanded by Republican dominance in both the Senate and House of Representatives. The next two years leading up to the 2026 Congressional midterm elections will be a period of maximum opportunity for Donald Trump and the Republican Party as a whole to pursue the initiatives they consider most critical.

A change in administration in Washington could bring a fundamentally different dynamic to U.S. actions in the Middle East. It is unlikely that Trump's return to the White House would simply replicate the last U.S. strategy in the region, which was entirely built around an anti-Iranian core. Nevertheless, the United States has few serious means of pressuring Tehran apart from the threat of military force. Containing Iran's missile and, especially, nuclear programs, as well as countering Tehran's growing regional influence will remain among the top priorities for the Republican administration. However, potential military confrontation with one of the region's largest countries contradicts Donald Trump's pledge to end wars rather than start them and could negatively impact the security of the main Middle East U.S. ally – Israel.

²⁴ Davydov, A.A. U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan as a Harbinger of a New Era. *Vostok. Afro-Asian Societies: History and Present*. 2022. No. 2. Pp. 63–74.

²⁵ 2016 Republican Party Platform // The American Presidency Project. July 18, 2016. URL: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2016-republican-party-platform>

Israel's prosperity and security may become the only intra-regional goal of the Republican administration. It is no coincidence that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was the first foreign leader with whom Donald Trump held a telephone conversation after his election. In all likelihood, the new administration's main imperatives in the region will be the further advancement of the Abraham Accords and practical solutions to Israel's security issues, primarily related to threats from Gaza and Lebanon.

Strategic goal setting around other issues and aspects of Middle Eastern problems will be primarily determined by extra-regional priorities. Resolving Israel's current security challenges, like achieving any ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine, would allow for greater focus on addressing the main strategic objective of the U.S. foreign policy – countering China's growing influence. A significant portion of the regional agenda, such as combating international terrorism, providing humanitarian and socioeconomic assistance, mitigating contradictions between U.S.-allied Kurds and their adversaries, and strengthening state institutions in countries to maintain regional stability will be relegated to second or even third priority and will mostly be addressed at the bureaucratic rather than top strategic level.

In this context, U.S.-Saudi relations may gain significant momentum. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the largest markets for U.S. weapons. Notably until 2024, legal agreements were in place whereby Saudi Arabia sold its oil exclusively for dollars. Moreover, Riyadh's position as a key supplier of oil to China, its ability to influence the global energy market, and its willingness to negotiate the diplomatic recognition of Israel significantly increase the likelihood that the Trump administration will seek long-term agreements with Saudi Arabia to achieve strategic U.S. foreign policy goals.

Nevertheless, overall U.S. involvement in regional processes is unlikely to remain at the same level as it was at the beginning of the 21st century. The U.S. political establishment has started to shape its strategy towards countries in the region in line with issues that are more connected to a broader international agenda than local concerns. With a high degree of probability, during Donald Trump's next presidential term, the U.S. Middle East policies will maintain and strengthen the trend of reducing the importance of the region, including when compared with the strategic imperatives in Europe and particularly Asia, as outlined by Joe Biden's outgoing administration.

European Union Middle East Policy

Lida
Oganisyan

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) occupies a special place in the European Union's system of foreign policy priorities. Geographical proximity, historical and cultural ties with countries in the region, and economic and energy interests make Europeans extremely sensitive to security and stability issues along their southern borders.

For a long time, the EU has made efforts to politically construct this territorially close space. Although the European Economic Community's heightened attention to MENA began in the 1970s, the modern EU policy in the region originates from the 1995 Barcelona Conference, which launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.²⁶

Other pillars of the European Union's policy in the region became the European Neighborhood Policy initiated in 2004²⁷ and the Union for the Mediterranean established in 2008.²⁸ These three complementary tools were designed to promote stability in MENA by encouraging democratic development in Arab states and spreading European values and norms. However, the need to maintain uninterrupted energy supplies, extensive trade and economic cooperation, and security interests traditionally outweighed the imperatives of democratization and explained the logic behind engagement with local authoritarian rulers.

The Arab Spring disrupted the EU's somewhat inertial approach, revealing serious flaws in its policy and the inability of member states to coordinate their positions on regional security issues. The EU interpreted the revolutionary events of 2011 as the beginning of democratization in the region's states and directed its efforts towards supporting reforms in Arab countries by using incentive-based tools. However, the effectiveness of this approach proved to be limited. The European Union's efforts were successful in those few countries where new authorities themselves embarked on a course of democratic transformation, such as Tunisia.

By the mid-2010s, the brief period of optimism regarding political processes in the region gave way to growing alarmist sentiments, intensified by further destabilization of the political situation in MENA, refugee flows to the EU, migration crisis of 2015–2016 and increased terrorist activity in EU countries.

All of this influenced internal socio-political dynamics in Europe, triggering deeper divisions between EU countries, increasing societal polarization, nationalism and Euroscepticism, and became one of the catalysts for Britain's exit from the EU.

²⁶ Barcelona Declaration // The Council of the European Union. November 1995. URL: https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/barcelona_declaration_27_and_28_november_1995-en-0beb3332-0bba-4d00-bd07-46d8f758d897.html

²⁷ European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy Paper // Commission of the European Communities. May 12, 2004. URL: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-01/2004_communication_from_the_commission_-_european_neighbourhood_policy_-_strategy_paper.pdf

²⁸ Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean // Commission of the European Communities. May 20, 2008. URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs_autres_institutions/commission_europeenne/com/2008/0319/COM_COM\(2008\)0319_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs_autres_institutions/commission_europeenne/com/2008/0319/COM_COM(2008)0319_EN.pdf)

Against this backdrop, the European Union's policy of supporting democratic changes in the region gave way to the imperatives of stabilizing the situation along its southern borders.

The shift in EU priorities in the Middle East was reflected in new strategic documents. In the revised European Neighborhood Policy of 2015²⁹ and the 2016 EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe,"³⁰ Brussels acknowledged the need to adopt a more pragmatic position to more effectively contribute to stabilizing the situation in the Southern Mediterranean, including by enhancing the "resilience" of states and societies, i.e. their ability to reform and overcome internal and external crises.

The 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration was marked by EU authorities acknowledging that problems in the region had not only remained unresolved but had worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2021, the European Commission presented a "New Agenda for the Mediterranean"³¹ in Brussels, which was intended to serve as an updated framework for EU relations with MENA countries. The document outlined a broad range of cooperation areas: from healthcare support, creating conditions for a "twin green and digital transition" and ensuring climate change resilience, to collaboration aimed at conflict resolution. The document also included an economic and investment plan to stimulate long-term socio-economic development of the region's states. However, despite identifying numerous partnership areas, the EU's new strategy continued the "old" course, emphasizing issues that concern European countries – namely, migration and strengthening trade relations with southern neighbors.

In recent years, the regional dynamics in MENA have changed significantly. This is influenced by factors such as Russia's political activity, China's growing political and economic influence amid the relative decline in U.S. involvement in regional processes, the fragility of bilateral and multilateral alliances and partnerships, and increasing rivalry and tension. While not being a key extra-regional player in the transformations taking place in the MENA region, the EU is trying to adapt to the new realities.

Today, the region is a source of instability and cross-border security threats to the EU. Amid conflicts and crises, natural, social and political upheavals, and the growing scarcity of fresh water and food in many parts of the region, increasingly broad swaths of the population are in dire need of humanitarian aid. The European Union is the largest donor of such aid, including for Syria and millions of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries, for Yemen, for the UN Relief and Works Agency

²⁹ Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy // European Commission. November 18, 2015. URL: http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf

³⁰ Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy // European External Action Service. June 2016. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf

³¹ Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. A New Agenda for the Mediterranean // European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. February 9, 2021. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf

for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), through which the main support is channeled to Gaza, for those affected by the devastating earthquake of February 2023 in Turkey and Syria, among others. In early 2024, the European Commission approved an annual budget for humanitarian aid from the EU amounting to more than €1.8 billion, with a quarter of this sum (€470 million) planned to be allocated specifically for MENA.³²

The European Union is also the largest donor of development aid. EU budget funds are directed towards achieving a wide range of goals: from promoting democratic values and norms to stabilizing conditions in countries across the region and controlling migration flows. From the second half of the 2010s, one of the new trends in the EU's aid policy has been the increasingly active financing of key security objectives. The EU has significantly increased financial support for initiatives to strengthen border control and counter-terrorism capabilities of Arab states.³³

In 2023–2024, the number of asylum seekers in the EU approached the peak figures of 2015. Under these conditions, two key trends have emerged: the securitization of migration, i.e. viewing it as a security threat, and the development of an external dimension to the EU's migration and asylum policy, known as externalization or the outsourcing of migration issues. The latter involves expanding cooperation with countries of origin and transit in order to contain flows of illegal migration into the European Union. Within this approach, the EU concluded a comprehensive agreement with Tunisia in 2023. It involves strengthening border control in exchange for financial support and, according to European politician intentions, was meant to serve as a model for future EU agreements with third countries.³⁴

Migration agreements are unpopular in MENA countries and are viewed as attempts to impose policing functions in the EU's interests, which is why Brussels concludes more comprehensive agreements where migration is just one component.³⁵ In 2024, several such agreements were signed with various countries in the region. In particular, in March 2024, a treaty was signed with Egypt to elevate the partnership to a strategic level, which, alongside expanded economic and political cooperation, includes collaboration in combating illegal migration and

³² The Commission Announces Initial Humanitarian Aid of €1.8 Billion for 2024 // European Commission. February 12, 2024. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/commission-announces-initial-humanitarian-aid-€1.8-billion-2024_en?s=225

³³ For more details see: Youngs, R., Zihnioglu, O. EU Aid Policy in the Middle East and North Africa: Politicization and Its Limits. *Journal of Common Market Studies*. 2021. Vol. 59. Pp. 126–142; Bartenev, V.I. International Assistance to the Middle East and North Africa: Managing the Risks. Report No. 62/2020. Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). Moscow: NPMP RIAC, 2021. 104 p. Martini, L.S., Megerisi, T. Road To Nowhere: Why Europe's Border Externalization Is a Dead End. European Council on Foreign Relations. December 2023. 36 p.; Bisson, L.S., Potemkina, O.Y. Migration Crisis in the EU: Version 2.0? *Analytical Notes of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences*. 2023. № 33 (330). Pp. 79–88.

³⁴ Martini, L.S., Megerisi, T. Road To Nowhere: Why Europe's Border Externalization Is a Dead End. European Council on Foreign Relations. December 2023. 36 p.; Bisson, L.S., Potemkina, O.Y. Migration Crisis in the EU: Version 2.0? *Analytical Notes of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences*. 2023. № 33 (330). Pp. 79–88.

³⁵ After Tunisia, Egypt: The EU Launches New Controversial Migration Agreements // The Magret Times. March 16, 2024. URL: <https://themaghrebtimes.com/after-tunisia-egypt-the-eu-launches-new-controversial-migration-agreements/>

features an aid package worth €7.4 billion.³⁶ Algeria, unlike its neighbors, strives to demonstrate greater independence on migration issues and refrains from entering into similar agreements with the EU.³⁷ Against the backdrop of growing concerns in southern EU member states about the risks of increasing migration flows, the European Commission announced in May 2024 a €1 billion aid package for Lebanon,³⁸ which also fits into the EU's established approach to addressing migration challenges.

The focus on developing the external dimension of its migration policy, as opposed to efforts to reform EU migration legislation,³⁹ which has its flaws, does not cause serious disagreements between member states, although it is not without shortcomings. The 2024 European Parliament elections, which strengthened right-wing forces, are likely to spur further the securitization and externalization of migration issues.

Despite its relative effectiveness, this approach has drawn criticism from human rights organizations, political figures, and the EU's academic community. It presents ethical and image-related dilemmas for individual member states and the entire EU in managing migration flows. However, it is only a short-term solution to the problem, as such an approach does not address the root causes of instability, despite aid programs, encouraged legal migration, etc. Migration externalization not only fails to expand Brussels' influence over partner countries but also allows them to exert pressure on the EU by playing the "migration card," a tactic Turkey has repeatedly employed. Beyond resolving disagreements on migration issues, an important task for Brussels – in relation to Ankara – is finding ways to resolve key contradictions, including territorial disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, and a new formula for cooperation with Turkey, while accession negotiations remain suspended.

To promote peace and stability along its southern borders, the EU has deployed several civilian and military missions under its Common Security and Defense Policy. In Libya specifically, the civilian mission EUBAM Libya has been operating since 2013, aimed at strengthening Libyan authority border security capabilities. On the other hand, the EUNAVFOR MED IRINI operation has been active in the Mediterranean Sea since 2020, with objectives including preventing human trafficking and migrant smuggling. In 2017, the EUAM Iraq mission was deployed to support security sector reforms in Iraq. In February 2024, the EU launched naval operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES to protect commercial vessels from Houthi

³⁶ Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership Between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union // European Commission. March 17, 2024. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_24_1513

³⁷ Ghanem, D. Rocky Road Ahead: The Challenges of EU–Algeria Relations // ISPI. July 23, 2024. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/rocky-road-ahead-the-challenges-of-eu-algeria-relations-181457>

³⁸ President von der Leyen Reaffirms EU's Strong Support for Lebanon and Its People and Announces a €1 Billion Package of EU Funding // European Commission. May 2, 2024. URL: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/president-von-der-leyen-reaffirms-eus-strong-support-lebanon-and-its-people-and-announces-eu1-2024-05-02_en

³⁹ On May 14, 2024, the EU Council gave final approval to the ten legal documents of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which had been in development since 2020, and the 2016 Asylum Pact aimed at reforming asylum and migration policy. The new legislation will come into force by June 2026.

attacks, aiming to ensure safe navigation in the Red Sea and mitigate the disruptive consequences for European companies caused by rising tensions.⁴⁰

The conflict in Ukraine has significantly influenced the EU's approach to the MENA region, increasing the importance of developing partnerships with countries in the region, including in trade, the economy and energy. Securing access to Middle Eastern energy resources has become one of the key priorities for EU member states, especially amid deteriorating relations with Russia. An important direction of the EU policy has been the intensification of relations with the GCC, given new momentum following the adoption of a strategic partnership document in May 2022,⁴¹ and then the establishment of an EU Special Envoy position for the Gulf region in 2023.⁴² In 2022, Brussels also welcomed several positive developments in the region, including the agreement with Israel and Egypt on gas exports to Europe and the demarcation of the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon.

Since 2022, in an effort to reduce dependence on Russian gas imports, the EU has taken steps to enhance cooperation with Algeria, despite disagreements on migration and trade and investment issues. According to various data, for the first quarter of 2024, Algeria is the second largest supplier of natural gas to the EU (19.7%) and provides 9.9% of liquefied natural gas supplies to European Union countries.⁴³ In its efforts to diversify energy suppliers, the European Union is establishing cooperation with countries in the region to ensure stable natural gas supplies, which aligns with its long-term decarbonization goals.

Intensified cooperation between MENA states and non-Western extra-regional players is promoting ties with Asian countries, which is reflected in the changing structure of energy exports and patterns of trade, economic and investment relations. However, the EU remains an important partner for Middle Eastern and especially North African countries in the fields of energy, trade and investment, while individual member states, particularly France, Italy and Germany, are major arms exporters to the region's countries. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 2019 and 2023, France accounted for 12%, Italy for 10% and Germany for 7.1% of total arms imports by Middle Eastern states.⁴⁴

Against the backdrop of increasing activity by extra-regional players in the MENA region, Mediterranean countries, namely Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and

⁴⁰ Missions and Operations // EU Common Security and Defense Policy. March 2024.

URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EU-mission-and-operation_2024.pdf

⁴¹ Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. A Strategic Partnership with the Gulf // European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. May 18, 2022. URL: <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Joint%20Communication%20to%20the%20European%20Parliament%20and%20the%20Council%20-%20A%20Strategic%20Partnership%20with%20the%20Gulf.pdf>

⁴² EU appoints a new Special Representative for the Gulf region // Council of the EU. May 15, 2023. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/15/eu-appoints-a-new-special-representative-for-the-gulf-region/>

⁴³ EU Imports of Energy Products Continue to Drop // Eurostat. July 1, 2024.

URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240701-1>

⁴⁴ European Arms Imports Nearly Double, U.S. and French Exports Rise, and Russian Exports Fall Sharply // SIPRI. March 11, 2024. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/european-arms-imports-nearly-double-us-and-french-exports-rise-and-russian-exports-fall-sharply>

Egypt, have become recipients of the EU's Global Gateway initiative, which was launched in 2021 as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. This strategy to develop a network of infrastructure projects worldwide aims to promote the EU's foreign policy and economic interests, as well as achieve objectives in transport, energy and climate. Although the number of projects implemented under the initiative in MENA countries and the breadth of regional coverage remain quite modest, the region is considered one of the key directions of the EU's foreign policy activities.⁴⁵ Also of interest is the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC) announced in 2023 with EU participation, which envisions the creation of a railway route and the development of maritime infrastructure. However, the scale of the proposed initiative, financial and logistical challenges, and political instability in the region raise many questions about its implementation prospects.

The EU's commitment to enhancing the effectiveness of its policy in MENA and strengthening its role in regional affairs faces several obstacles. First, internal disunity makes it difficult for member states to reach agreements on common foreign or defense policy issues. In particular, competition between France and Italy regarding Libya, disagreements over Syria⁴⁶ – which have only intensified recently – and the lack of consensus on addressing migration issues are damaging the EU's international image.

The EU's lack of unity in responding to challenges from the MENA region was again demonstrated during the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which began in October 2023. The new round of confrontation increased polarization in European societies and exposed deep disagreements both between member states⁴⁷ and between EU institutions (for example, between the head of the European Commission on one hand, and the President of the European Council and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs on the other), showing their inability to coordinate their actions. The response of member states to the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict revealed numerous fault lines in EU policy. The crisis surrounding UNRWA funding after allegations of agency staff involvement in the Hamas attack on Israel also revealed many problems, as did difficulties in agreeing on sanctions against Hamas members and individuals violating Palestinian rights in the West Bank. These events dealt a significant blow to the

⁴⁵ For more details, see: Rizzi, A., Varvelli, A. *Opening the Global Gateway: Why the EU Should Invest More in the Southern Neighbourhood* // ECFR. March 2023. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/opening-the-global-gateway-why-the-eu-should-invest-more-in-the-southern-neighbourhood/>

Melnikova, J., Famigli, G. *Competition in Regional Connectivity Development: EU Global Gateway*. Working Paper No. 84. RIAC. Moscow: NPMP RIAC, 2024. 76 p.

⁴⁶ In June 2024, eight EU member states called for a "more active, outcome-driven, and operational Syria policy" to strengthen political influence, increase the effectiveness of humanitarian aid and create conditions necessary for the return of Syrian refugees. (For more details, see: Brzozowski, A. *Eight EU Member States Call for Syria Policy Reset* // Euractiv. July 22, 2024. URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eight-eu-member-states-call-for-syria-policy-reset/>). In June 2024, Italy decided to reopen its embassy in Damascus. These processes exacerbate disagreements within the Union, as countries such as France and Germany believe that the fundamental parameters of the EU's Syria policy should remain unchanged.

⁴⁷ Despite the wide range of member state views on specific aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the EU emphasizes its long-standing commitment to "a just and comprehensive resolution ... based on the two state solution." For more details see: *Middle East and North Africa (MENA)* // European Union External Service. May 2, 2024. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena_en

Union's image in the Arab world. Working in more flexible formats could help overcome this disunity,⁴⁸ however this is not a panacea and requires time, effort and financial resources.

Second, coordinating a unified policy among 27 member states, often complicated by the independent courses of individual members, presents a significant challenge for the European Union. The EU's approach to the region is heavily influenced by the United States. Disagreements between the U.S. and EU on specific issues in the MENA region sometimes create additional complications and risks, as exemplified by the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, the imposition of secondary sanctions on European companies following the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and the prospects for resolving the Iranian nuclear program issue, which was an important objective for the European Union.

These and other obstacles, related to the complexity of the EU's institutional system, the specific nature of relations between member states and the need to coordinate their positions, lead the EU to focus on addressing immediate concerns and solving short-term problems in the region, often at the expense of long-term interests. The potential for expanding EU influence in the region will depend on the political will of member states and the European Union's ability to convert its economic and diplomatic assets, soft power resources, humanitarian aid and official assistance into political influence in the MENA region. However, against the backdrop of growing competition in MENA, the EU's scope for employing various means of influence, particularly economic, on regional countries is noticeably narrowing.

⁴⁸ For more details, see: Kausch, K. *A Decade of Deadlock. The EU's Shipwreck on Palestine Embodies the EU's Blockade Problem*. Joint Brief. March 2024. 9 p.; Mapping European Leverage in the MENA Region // ECFR. URL: https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/

Main Priorities of the People's Republic of China in the Middle East

Alexander
Lomanov

The signing of a declaration in Beijing in July 2024 by representatives of Palestinian factions to end division and strengthen national unity has become a clear demonstration of China's growing influence in the Middle East. This event appears even more significant in light of the agreement to restore diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, reached in March 2023 with China's assistance.

Chinese media have begun optimistically discussing how the PRC has managed to create a unique model of diplomatic mediation capable of offering new ideas for peace and stability in the Middle East, bringing its own positive energy.⁴⁹ The Beijing Declaration of Palestinian factions has confirmed the validity and appeal of China's foreign policy ideals, as well as the country's ability to provide public security goods to the region.

The scale of Beijing's economic cooperation with the region is steadily growing. China's trade volume with Arab countries increased from \$36.7 billion in 2004 to \$398 billion in 2023.⁵⁰ Trade between China and the six GCC states rose from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$230 billion in 2021.⁵¹

Chinese statistics indicate a very rapid expansion of trade with the Middle East: between 2017 and 2022, its volume doubled, and in 2022 it increased by 27.1% in a single year, outpacing China's trade growth with ASEAN countries (15%), the EU (5.6%) and the U.S. (3.7%).⁵²

China has become the most important trading partner for many countries in the region, consistently adhering to a strategy of political non-interference. However, recent successes in reconciling rival countries and factions have been perceived as clear evidence that Beijing has gained political influence to complement its existing economic clout. The effectiveness of Chinese diplomacy is attributed to the "wisdom of an oriental global power with a deep cultural and historical heritage" capable of creating "win-win strategic partnerships."⁵³

China believes that specifying the plans for bilateral strategic partnership will contribute to stabilizing the situation in the region and globally. The signing of the 25-year Comprehensive Cooperation Plan between China and Iran in March 2021 exemplifies such a policy. The document establishes a foundation for long-

⁴⁹ China's Mediation in the Middle East, Every Step is for Peace: Global Times editorial // Global Times. July 22, 2024. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202407/1316445.shtml>

⁵⁰ Hong Kong: Key Link Between Mainland China And The Middle East // Forbes. October 8, 2024. URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/familyofficehk/2024/10/08/hong-kong-key-link-between-mainland-china-and-the-middle-east/>

⁵¹ China's Growing Influence in the Middle East // The Strategist. July 29, 2024. URL: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-growing-influence-in-the-middle-east/>

⁵² Sino Trade Volumes Soar with Middle East, Africa // The State Council of People's Republic of China. July 17, 2023. URL: https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202307/17/content_WS64b49b48c6d0868f4e8ddd72.html

⁵³ Wang Zhen. The Significance of the Beijing Declaration // China-United States Exchange Foundation. August 8, 2024. URL: <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/the-significance-of-the-beijing-declaration/>

term political and economic cooperation. Beijing supports Tehran in defending its national sovereignty and chosen development path, rejecting Western unilateral sanctions policies. According to unofficial estimates, approximately 90% of Iran's crude oil exports go to China.⁵⁴

Iranian authorities are interested in diversifying their connections by expanding cooperation in investment, digital technologies and tourism. According to Chinese sources, the total bilateral trade volume reached \$14.66 billion in 2023, of which \$10.08 billion came from Chinese exports and \$4.58 billion from Iranian imports to China. In the first half of 2024, trade between the countries amounted to \$6.91 billion, with \$4.75 billion in exports from China and \$2.16 billion in imports to China.⁵⁵

China consistently supported Iran's accession to the SCO and BRICS. Beijing is unwilling to respond to Western calls for increased pressure on Tehran. During a meeting with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian at the BRICS summit in Kazan in October 2024, Xi Jinping described Iran as a country with regional and international influence and a good friend and partner of China. He emphasized that the strategic importance of Sino-Iranian relations is becoming increasingly evident as the world undergoes unprecedented changes at an accelerated pace. Xi Jinping promised to steadily develop friendly cooperation with Iran, support Tehran in safeguarding its national sovereignty, security and dignity, steadily advance its economic and social development, and improve and deepen good-neighborly and friendly relations with surrounding countries.⁵⁶

China's relations with Turkey, meanwhile, are complicated by Turkish support for Chinese Uyghurs and criticism of Beijing for "human rights violations" in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Such statements from Ankara negatively impact the development of relations between the two states.

The period of instability in China's Xinjiang during the 2010s was accompanied by strict government measures to maintain order, ensure anti-terrorist security and reintegrate Uyghurs into the broader Chinese cultural and legal framework.

After the situation stabilized and state policies were partially relaxed, there were fewer grounds for criticism. This allowed Ankara to shift the focus in bilateral relations towards economic cooperation.

Turkey is interested in attracting Chinese investments and overcoming the imbalance in bilateral trade, where China's exports to Turkey are approximately ten times greater than its imports. Ankara aims to increase its product exports to China and attract Chinese companies to develop Turkey's energy sector. In July 2024, the Chinese firm BYD announced plans to invest \$1 billion in establishing

⁵⁴ China is the Customer of 90% of Iran's Oil // EnergyPress. May 18, 2024.

URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240705044748/https://energyPress.ir/en/china-is-the-customer-of-90-of-irans-oil/>

⁵⁵ China's Relations with Iran (in Chinese: 中国同伊朗的关系 (最近更新时间: 2024年7月) // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. October 2024.

URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_677172/sbgx_677176/

⁵⁶ Xi Jinping Meets with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. October 24, 2024. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202410/20241025_11516004.html

an electric vehicle factory in Turkey.⁵⁷ For Turkey, this represents an opportunity to acquire new technology and enhance the quality of its national industry, while for China it offers a potential way to bypass barriers to electric vehicle exports to EU countries.

Turkish support for China's Belt and Road Initiative can strengthen China's position in developing international transport infrastructure in the Middle East. Turkey's application to join BRICS, which would have been impossible without China's support, embodies Ankara's pursuit of a multi-vector policy without severing ties with the U.S. and EU.

In July 2024, during a meeting with President Recep Erdogan in Astana on the sidelines of the SCO summit, Xi Jinping noted that China and Turkey are major developing countries of the Global South, with a broad consensus on developing cooperation and protecting international legal norms. Xi Jinping emphasized that China encourages expanded trade between the parties, supports increased investment by Chinese enterprises in Turkey, promotes cooperation in infrastructure projects on an orderly basis and encourages Chinese tourism to Turkey. According to the Chinese leader, the two countries hold identical or similar views on many issues including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Ukrainian crisis and other problems. China expressed readiness to strengthen coordination and cooperation with Turkey within the UN and G20.⁵⁸

In implementing its Middle East policy, the Chinese mainstream firmly rejects Western attempts to view Beijing's activities in the Middle East through the lens of great-power rivalry. Meanwhile, American experts are convinced that China aims to "wean" the Middle East from the United States and that its actions in the region are entirely subordinated to the strategic goal of competing with the United States.

The problem lies in the fact that strategic rivalry with Beijing has become a long-term priority of Washington's policy. Biased arguments about China's desire to "push aside" the U.S., "undermine American influence" or "exploit chaos" for its own interests eliminate possibilities for constructive Sino-American cooperation in solving regional problems.

Debates about China's responsibility for maintaining the stability of the U.S.-centric world order date back to the beginning of this century. The U.S. was dissatisfied that China was benefiting from its participation in the global economy but unwilling to expend effort and resources to maintain its stability. In 2014, President Barack Obama directly called China a "free rider" that had benefited from the global system created by the U.S. for thirty consecutive years.⁵⁹ Technically, this referred to the situation in Iraq, but it raised questions about China's

⁵⁷ Samson, A., Alim, A.N. BYD Agrees \$1bn Deal to Build Electric Vehicle Plant in Turkey // Financial Times. August 8, 2024.
URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/248743c8-0f97-4d26-85c5-28ebbf9bc327>

⁵⁸ Xi Jinping met with Turkish President Erdogan (in Chinese: 习近平会见土耳其总统埃尔多安) // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. July 4, 2024.
URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202407/t20240704_11448366.shtml

⁵⁹ Obama Labeling China as 'Free Rider' in Iraq Issue // China Daily. September 4, 2014
URL: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-09/04/content_18543889.htm

role in the world. In the era of trade wars and technological restrictions imposed by the West against China, this argument has lost its former propaganda weight.

During the first three decades of reforms (1980s–2000s), Chinese leaders carefully avoided U.S. calls to take greater responsibility for solving global problems, citing the weakness of their economic foundation and incomplete reforms. At that time, it was not so much about a fundamental unwillingness to support a world order built on U.S. hegemony but rather concerns about the destructive impact of foreign policy commitments on China's stability and economic sustainability. Some Chinese experts suggested that the West was deliberately trying to impose an unbearable burden on the country to provoke adverse consequences for China. Numerous publications appeared in China exposing the foreign-invented "theory of China responsibility."⁶⁰

In October 2017, in his report to the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Xi Jinping announced the beginning of a "new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics," in which China, having grown wealthy during the reform years, should become strong.⁶¹ Economic weakness can no longer be considered a key argument in debates about international responsibility. China wants to significantly increase its influence on global development and security. The U.S. and EU, in turn, are trying to use this mindset to encourage Beijing to demonstrate its influence externally by intervening in crisis situations, for example, to remove threats to shipping in the Red Sea or to end the conflict in the Gaza Strip.

At the first China-Arab summit held in December 2022, Xi Jinping outlined the contours of China's long-term policy towards the Arab world. It encompasses mutual support for protecting the independence and sovereignty of Arab countries, economic cooperation including infrastructure construction under the Belt and Road Initiative, safeguarding peace and ensuring "joint security." China's proposed strategy of "eight major joint actions" includes promoting development, strengthening food and energy security and healthcare systems, improving public welfare, implementing green innovations, expanding civilizational dialogue, carrying out programs to support young talents, and achieving security and stability. The Chinese leader called on his Arab colleagues to jointly counter Islamophobia, cooperate on deradicalization issues, and oppose associating terrorism with specific religions and ethnic groups.⁶²

At this summit, Xi Jinping set a goal to create a "China-Arab community of shared future." This "community" is derived from the fundamental Chinese foreign policy concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind." Being addressed to a specific region, the concept assumes that China and Arab countries share not only common values and aspirations but also a set of priority areas for cooperation formulated with regional specifics in mind that serve the interests of both sides.

⁶⁰ Xu Jin. How to View China's International Responsibility (in Chinese: 徐进. 如何看待中国的国际责任) // China Science News. November 4, 2013. URL: <http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2013/1104/175832.shtml>

⁶¹ Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at the 19th CPC Congress // Xinhua. November 3, 2017. URL: https://russian.news.cn/2017-11/03/c_136726299.htm

⁶² Xi Jinping Calls for Building a Closer China-Arab Community with a Shared Future (2) // Xinhua. December 12, 2022. URL: <http://russian.people.com.cn/n3/2022/1212/c31520-10182632-2.html>

The next China-Arab Cooperation Forum is scheduled for 2026. The Chinese side continuously improves and refines cooperation plans addressed to the Arab world. In May 2024, Xi Jinping stated that amid major global changes, China and Arab countries bear responsibility for the revival of their nations and accelerating state-building.⁶³ According to him, creating a “China-Arab community of shared future” reflects the common aspiration of both sides to usher in a new era in relations and create a beautiful future for the entire world. The Chinese leader expressed readiness to cooperate with the Arab side in upholding a just and orderly multipolar world, promoting inclusive economic globalization beneficial to all, and establishing a model of South–South cooperation in global governance.⁶⁴

Xi Jinping noted that oil and gas, trade and infrastructure projects remain the stabilizers of bilateral economic cooperation and called for faster development of interaction in areas such as artificial intelligence, investment and finance, and renewable energy sources. As part of developing the “eight major joint actions” strategy, he proposed “five major cooperation frameworks” to the Arab world. This involves intensifying innovative cooperation, which includes: creating ten joint laboratories, expanding investment and financial interaction, developing energy cooperation, including joint development of new energy technologies and equipment manufacturing, creating a more balanced model of trade and economic interaction, which entails signing free trade agreements and fostering e-commerce cooperation, and more intensive humanitarian exchanges, encompassing joint research in areas such as civilizational interaction, reform and development.

China seeks to expand cooperation with the Arab world, expressing a clear position on the Palestinian issue. Xi Jinping described the Middle East as “fertile ground for development” where the fires of war continue to rage. The Chinese leader noted that although the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has sharply escalated since October 2023, “[t]he war should not continue indefinitely. Justice should not be absent forever. Commitment to the two-state solution should not be wavered at will.”⁶⁵ Xi Jinping confirmed that China firmly supports the establishment of a fully sovereign independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, advocates for Palestine’s full membership in the UN and the convening of a meaningful and effective international conference to reach a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

In July 2024, during the signing of the Beijing Declaration on ending division and strengthening Palestinian national unity by Palestinian factions, Chinese Foreign

⁶³ Chairman of the PRC Xi Jinping. Develop the Spirit of China-Arab Friendship, Join Hands to Build a China-Arab Community of Shared Future for the New Era – Keynote Speech at the Opening of the First China-Arab States Summit (9 December 2022, Riyadh) (in Chinese 中华人民共和国主席习近平. 弘扬中 阿友好精神携手构建面向新时代的中阿命运共同体——在首届中国 – 阿拉伯国家峰会开幕式上的主旨讲话 (二〇二二年十二月九日, 利雅得) 《人民日报》(2022年12月10日第04 版)) // People’s Daily, December 10, 2022. P. 4.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Chairman of the PRC Xi Jinping. Deepening Cooperation, Opening the Future, Promoting Accelerated Construction of the China-Arab Community of Shared Destiny – Keynote Speech at the Opening of the 10th Ministerial-Level Conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum (May 30, 2024, Beijing) (in Chinese 中华人民共和国主席习近平. 深化合作, 继往开来推动中阿命运共同体建设跑出加速度——在中阿合作论坛第十届部长级会议开幕式上的主旨讲话 (2024年5月30日, 北京) 《人民日报》(2024年05月31日第02 版)) // People’s Daily, May 31, 2024. P. 2.

Minister Wang Yi presented China's "three-step plan" aimed at ending the crisis in Gaza. The first step is to achieve a comprehensive, lasting and sustainable ceasefire as soon as possible, ensuring access for humanitarian aid and rescue workers. The second step is to observe the principle of "Palestinians governing Palestine" and promote post-conflict settlement in Gaza through joint efforts.

The third step is to facilitate Palestine's admission to the UN as a full member and implement the plan to create two states – Israel and Palestine.⁶⁶

China's shift in sympathies towards Palestinians and the Arab world is occurring as part of Beijing's pivot towards full-scale cooperation with countries of the global South. This "turn to the South" is largely driven by deteriorating relations with the West and the desire to find promising new foreign partners. In China, there is now much discussion about the Global South and cooperation with it. For example, in August 2023, *People's Daily* published a commentary declaring China a steadfast member of the vast family of developing countries, sharing their values and understanding their problems better than anyone else.⁶⁷

Beijing's more active dialogue with the Arab world is replacing its previous cautious "equidistance" from both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The Communist Party of China began moving closer to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) during the Soviet-Chinese split in the mid-1960s. Support for the Palestinian liberation movement became less relevant for China during the period of market reforms and globalization, yet the institutional memory of their former cooperation has survived to this day. Now friends in the Global South are once again valuable to China.

For two and a half decades – from the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and Israel in 1992 until the declaration of an "innovative comprehensive partnership" between the two countries in 2017 – there existed an unspoken productive balance between the states. This balance meant that China was interested in cooperation with Israel as a technologically advanced country and hoped for joint development of transport infrastructure, potentially including Israel's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. China's "equidistance" was pragmatic and aimed at securing economic benefits.

The deterioration in U.S.–China relations has led Washington to force its allies to abandon cooperation with China in high-tech sectors, participation in the Belt and Road Initiative and any other Chinese infrastructure projects. Israel, dependent on U.S. support, inevitably heeds these wishes. The breakdown of economic ties weakens China's interest in cooperation with Israel, so much will depend on Israeli politician abilities to maintain engagement with China while preventing the complete collapse of the "equidistance" model.

⁶⁶ Palestinian Factions Sign Beijing Declaration on Ending Division and Strengthening Palestinian National Unity (in Chinese 巴勒斯坦各派在京签署《关于结束分裂加强巴勒斯坦民族团结的北京宣言》《人民日报》(2024年07月24日第03版)) // *People's Daily*, July 24, 2024. P. 3.

⁶⁷ Unity and Self-Strengthening, Promoting the Building of an Equal and Orderly Multipolar World (in Chinese 团结自强, 推动建设平等有序的多极世界) // *People's Daily*, August 9, 2023.
URL: http://www.qstheory.cn/qshy/jx/2023-08/09/c_1129793829.htm

China consistently emphasizes the need to strengthen the UN's authority and calls for interpreting Middle Eastern conflicts based on adherence to the organization's principles. Furthermore, the PRC seeks to offer the region its own plans for reforming the world order, outlined in three global initiatives: the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative. In its communication with Global South countries, including Arab states, China never claims that its civilization is superior to others. It is much more eager to highlight that the position of superiority is held by the U.S. and its allies, who claim to possess the best institutions and values, while China seeks allies to build a multipolar world with equal relations between different countries.

The factor of U.S.-China rivalry has become long-term and will continue to influence China's relations with Middle Eastern countries in the foreseeable future. China expresses hope that in ten years the country will achieve economic and technological parity with the U.S. in key areas. This might push the U.S. towards a conclusion that further confrontation is futile and meaningless. However, one could just as easily expect the rivalry between the two powers to become the "new normal" of the century.

Chinese leadership has developed serious long-term plans for economic reforms. China's anticipated transformation into an advanced power in science and industry will reduce its dependence on Western technologies. This will help Beijing strengthen its foreign policy sovereignty and expand opportunities to pursue active policies. Furthermore, in its interactions with Global South countries, China could assume the role of a "one-stop partner" – selling necessary goods and technologies, providing development assistance and ensuring security. In this case, cooperation between Global South countries and the West will no longer be without alternatives, which will contribute to changing the mentality of regional players in the Arab world.

Chinese experts are optimistic about prospects for engagement with the Arab world. They believe that trust between China and Arab countries will increase, allowing them to become partners in promoting joint development, building a multipolar world and upholding international justice. The wave of reconciliations in Middle East relations will become a long-term sustainable trend that will give impetus to building a "China-Arab community of shared destiny."⁶⁸

The difficulty lies in the fact that Beijing's growing closeness with the Arab world is occurring against a backdrop of diminishing mutual political trust between China and Western countries. Under these conditions, transferring a "zero-sum game" model to the Middle East, where the U.S. considers any failure of Chinese policy a success, could become a source of additional instability.

⁶⁸ Dong Manyuan. Main Manifestations, Causes and Prospect of Leapfrog Development of China-Arab Relations in the New Era. *Contemporary World*. 2023. Pp. 28-29.

Main Directions of India's Middle East Policy

Alexey
Kupriyanov

India has a distinct attitude towards the Middle East, combining its self-perception as a separate civilization while also recognizing its deep historical, commercial, cultural and political ties with the region. These connections between India's regional policies on one hand, and the states and peoples of the Persian Gulf and Red Sea coasts on the other, date back to the times of Sumer and the Harappan civilization. After the beginning of the Muslim trade expansion in the Indian Ocean region and the conquest of Northern India, most of the Indian subcontinent was incorporated into the greater Islamic world. Within this framework, India developed as a distinct cultural, economic and political center, based on a specific Indo-Islamic civilization and maintaining connections with other parts of the Islamic world through cultural exchanges, pilgrimages and vibrant land and sea trade. After British conquest, these connections did not break but rather transform: Indian soldiers, police officers, merchants and workers became agents of the British Empire and formed nodes of the Indian diaspora throughout the world, including the Middle East. During decolonization, the diaspora experienced difficult times: in the process of national self-determination and the subsequent wars, Indians repeatedly became targets of violence, with many forced to emigrate. However, a significant part of the diaspora remained and helped establish contacts between independent India and the new Middle Eastern states.

In the post-independence period, relations between India and Middle Eastern countries were built on both economic and political foundations, with the latter often taking precedence. After the partition of British India into India and Pakistan, it was crucial for the authorities in New Delhi to prevent a situation where the entire Islamic world would support Pakistan based on religious affiliation. As a result, India pursued a friendly policy towards Arab countries in the subsequent years, engaging with them both within the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as bilaterally, advocating for the establishment of an independent Palestine and by opposing former colonial power interference in Middle Eastern affairs. Only with the end of the Cold War and changes in the global political and economic landscape was the Indian leadership able to adjust this position.

Nevertheless, regardless of the historical period, close grassroots connections have existed between the populations of the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, as well as between the informal economies of these regions. The unified "hawala-hundi" system continues to function,⁶⁹ allowing the transfer of any amount of money without official documentation, with all attempts by government authorities to bring it under control ending in failure. Informal trade networks operate, facilitating the smuggling of goods, drugs, weapons and people.

India's interests in the Middle East are diverse. First and foremost, New Delhi is interested in this region as a source of affordable hydrocarbons needed for

⁶⁹ Hawala is an informal financial settlement system operating on the basis of mutual offsetting of claims and obligations between brokers (hawaladars). Hundi is a South Asian prototype of hawala, which has several specific features but forms a unified financial settlement system with hawala.

India's growing economy. Due to the Ukrainian crisis and the severance of trade ties between Russia and Europe, Middle Eastern oil has ceded ground to Russian oil since 2022. This, however, does not mean that this situation will last forever – purchasing oil from the Middle East is economically more advantageous for Indian companies due to lower transportation costs.

Second, the wealthy Arab monarchies of the Middle East are important to New Delhi as a source of investment in the country's economy. Narendra Modi's government is implementing an ambitious program to restructure the Indian economy; for it to be successful, foreign funds must be attracted. The expectation that U.S.–China “decoupling” would force Western companies to withdraw business from China and actively invest in India as the only alternative has not materialized: the volume of direct Western investment has gradually declined in recent years.⁷⁰ For the economic reform to successfully conclude, other sources of investment need to be found, and Middle Eastern countries appear to be promising partners. Additionally, the Indian diaspora in Middle Eastern countries serves as an important source of currency inflow into the Indian economy, contributing to small business development and improving the overall purchasing power of the Indian population.

Several Middle Eastern countries are viewed by the Indian leadership as potential sources of new technologies. Currently, only Israel can fulfil this role. However, the large-scale development projects being implemented by Saudi Arabia and the UAE offer hope that they may eventually transform into technological hubs.

Finally, geopolitical considerations also play an important role. According to Indian political elites,⁷¹ further rapprochement between New Delhi and Middle Eastern countries will help weaken regional sympathies for Pakistan and counter-balance China's presence with U.S. support, preventing further growth of Chinese influence in the region of the Arabian and Red Seas, the Persian Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean and the “maritime encirclement” of India by Chinese bases.

In India's bilateral relations with Middle Eastern countries, its interaction with Israel deserves special attention. Formal relations between the two nations have been complex for a long time; despite India recognizing the state of Israel in 1950, it officially supported the idea of a Palestinian state and diplomatically adhered to the rhetoric of Arab countries on this issue. This was explained by India's desire to maintain its position as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as the socialist orientation of its leaders, which prompted Jawaharlal Nehru's and Indira Gandhi's governments to sympathize with the Arab cause. Furthermore, cooperation was also driven by purely practical considerations related to oil supplies. Despite all this, unofficial relations with Israel developed quite dynamically: Israel supported India during the Third Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 and shared valuable intelligence information with it. In 1992, India opened an embassy in Tel Aviv, and

⁷⁰ India Suffering a Quiet Decline in Foreign Direct Investment // The Diplomat. March 18, 2024. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/india-suffering-a-quiet-decline-in-foreign-direct-investment/>

⁷¹ India and the Middle East: Closeness of Power Against Pakistan // Institute for Political and International Studies. January 2, 2021. URL: <https://www.ipis.ir/en/subjectview/622377/india-and-the-middle-east-closeness-of-power-against-pakistan>

under Narendra Modi, relations reached a new level: India's leadership managed – despite the need to maintain relations with Arab countries and Palestinians – to establish mutually beneficial relations with Israel, signing a series of agreements for the joint development and production of high-tech products in defense, space research, and agriculture.⁷² India is primarily interested in this country as a source of technology and investment, a partner in the military-industrial complex and a potential importer of Indian labor, which would help create a diaspora similar to that already established in the Gulf countries. Geopolitical considerations also play an important role: India views the growth of Chinese economic presence in the country and region as a threat to its strategic plans to strengthen its position in the Eastern Mediterranean.

India historically enjoyed relatively good relations with Syria. Although Syria lagged behind many other Arab countries as a potential trading partner even during the Cold War, both sides politically supported each other: India recognized Syrian claims for the return of the Golan Heights occupied by Israel as legitimate, while Damascus in turn believed that the Kashmir issue should be resolved exclusively on a bilateral basis. In recent years, the situation has changed. The civil war in Syria, involving numerous actors, has prompted New Delhi to distance itself from involvement in the situation, as it could alienate India from several local forces and their external supporters. Investments in unstable Syria are economically unfeasible, and India has successfully avoided all attempts to draw it into Syrian projects, including in infrastructure.

India traditionally maintained its warmest relations with Iraq. Even during the First World War, Indian soldiers fought on Iraqi soil against the Ottoman Empire's army. After the war, there was even a proposal to transfer Iraq under the control of British India's authorities. After Saddam Hussein came to power, Iraq became one of India's key partners and oil suppliers. When Operation Desert Storm began, India refused to provide its airspace for coalition aircraft refueling and later helped Iraq circumvent sanctions. New Delhi strongly opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of the country by coalition forces deprived India of a loyal ally in the Middle East for a long time. However, over time, Indo-Iraqi political and economic relations began to recover, with New Delhi developing relations simultaneously with both Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan for a certain period. This process was briefly slowed by the expansion of ISIS*, but after its defeat Iraq once again became one of India's key oil suppliers.

Some of India's most valuable partners at present are the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Closer ties with the latter are particularly important for India from a political perspective: traditionally, Saudi Arabia has been one of Pakistan's sponsors, and its ruling circles maintain close connections with the Pakistani military. The strengthening of political and economic ties, as New Delhi hopes, should encourage Saudi authorities to adopt a more balanced position both on the Kashmir issue and on

⁷² Pillalamarri A. Why is India's Hindu Right Pro-Israel? // The Diplomat. June 24, 2024.
URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/why-is-indias-hindu-right-pro-israel/>

* An organization whose activities are banned in Russia.

India–Pakistan relations as a whole. As far as one can judge, this strategy has paid off: during the administrative reform in August 2019, when Kashmir was stripped of its state status, Riyadh took a measured stance, refusing to condemn this move despite Pakistan's calls. Like the UAE, Saudi Arabia represents a valuable source of investment and hydrocarbons for India. Additionally, a significant number of Indians reside in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. In 2022, India received a total of \$90 billion from its diaspora abroad. Of this, the UAE accounts for 18% of remittances, Saudi Arabia for 5.1% and Kuwait, Oman and Qatar together account for another 5.5%.⁷³ Moreover, the volume of remittances is increasing as the nature of Indian migration itself changes: while previously the lion's share of migrants consisted of unskilled workers, in recent years the percentage of engineers and managers among employees from India has been growing.

Egypt remains an important element of India's strategy in the Middle East – a long-standing partner of New Delhi in the Non-Aligned Movement. Currently, it interests India both as one of the key players in the region, whose moderate position allows India to build balanced relations with Israel and Arab countries, and as an investment destination – an economic gateway to the Middle East and North African countries. Indian businessmen actively invest in exploring promising oil and gas fields and establishing manufacturing enterprises.⁷⁴ Indian pharmaceutical companies (Sun Pharma Egypt Ltd, Pharmed Healthcare) operate in Egypt. Additionally, production of auto-rickshaw ("tuk-tuk") vehicles has been established.

Among major regional projects, Quad-2 is worth mentioning – an interstate initiative to create new financial and production chains involving Israel, India, the UAE and the U.S. Initially, New Delhi planned to participate as a supplier of inexpensive labor, hoping to provide its production facilities for implementing these chains, expecting Israel and the U.S. to supply technology while the UAE and U.S. would finance developmental projects.

A distinctive development of this initiative was the IMEC project, which, according to organizer visions, will begin in India and then pass through the territories of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Greece. Despite the information campaign accompanying its launch and the optimism displayed by all participants,⁷⁵ the prospect of developing a transport corridor along this route appears rather dubious from an economic perspective. This is because the route through the Red Sea and Suez Canal remains more advantageous, even despite regular Houthi attacks on commercial vessels linked to Israel. At the same time, there is potential for

⁷³ India Received \$90bn in Remittances in 2022, with UAE as Second-Biggest Source // The National. July 18, 2023. URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/money/2023/07/18/india-received-90bn-in-remittances-in-2022-with-uae-as-second-biggest-source/>

⁷⁴ India – Egypt Economic & Commercial Relations // Embassy of India, Cairo, Egypt. URL: <https://www.eoicairo.gov.in/page/economic/>

⁷⁵ Rizzi, A. The Infinite Connection: How to Make the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor Happen // ECFR. April 23, 2024. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-infinite-connection-how-to-make-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-happen/>; Suri, N., Ghosh, N., Taneja, K., Patil, S., Mookherjee, P. India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor: Towards a New Discourse in Global Connectivity // ORF. April 9, 2024. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-towards-a-new-discourse-in-global-connectivity>

forming a development corridor aimed at harnessing the potential of all participating countries and providing an alternative to Chinese infrastructure projects. However, implementing this initiative requires, first, significant investments from Southeast Asian countries interested in expanding exports to Europe and, second, substantial capital investments in infrastructure development within the corridor without any guarantees that the project will prove successful and profitable.

To summarize, India's policy towards Middle Eastern countries is determined by both cultural-historical and political-economic factors. Indian elites and the population do not perceive their country as foreign to the Middle Eastern social space. The Indian leadership approaches building relations with Middle Eastern states very pragmatically and develops strategic partnerships, viewing the countries in the region as potential investors, reliable hydrocarbon suppliers and employment opportunities for the growing Indian diaspora. Meanwhile, the announced large-scale transport infrastructure projects remain hypothetical: with the Suez Canal as an existing alternative, their implementation in the near future seems doubtful.

Extra-Regional Actors as Perceived by Middle Eastern Countries

Ivan
Bocharov

In 2024, certain trends that began forming in the foreign policies of Middle Eastern countries in previous years, continued to develop. This concerned not only the fundamental processes that have been observed in the region for decades but also relatively new trends, including those related to the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

As the role of extra-regional actors in the Middle East transforms, it is important to examine how regional elites perceive their Middle Eastern policies. For this purpose, the Russian International Affairs Council conducted a series of in-depth semi-formal interviews from July to December 2024 with leading Russian experts on Middle Eastern issues, including specialists on Arab countries, Iran, Israel and Turkic states. The consolidated expert assessments form the basis of the following section.

Arab Countries

First, each Arab state has its own interests and shapes its policies towards extraregional players based on the tasks and challenges it faces. Under these circumstances, it is impossible to speak of universal processes that would equally affect each country. Nevertheless, in some individual cases, certain similarities can be observed in how relations with extra-regional partners are built.

Arab State Aspirations to Play a More Prominent Role in International Relations

In recent years, there has been an increase in the significance of Arab countries in international relations, which is evident at both the regional and global levels. Experts expect that in the foreseeable future, the role of extra-regional actors in the Middle East may become less prominent.

The increasing participation of Arab countries in the processes of the regional subsystem of international relations is occurring in areas including those related to ensuring security in the Middle East. On the other hand, in the perceptions of Arab state political elites, the United States still plays an important, if not crucial, role in ensuring regional security. For many Arab countries, the United States remains the primary extra-regional ally, providing them with significant security guarantees, and the maintenance of a U.S. military presence in the Middle East is of great importance to them.

At the same time, Arab states have noted that the United States is streamlining its Middle East policies and reducing potential costs in areas that Washington considers unpromising; this has intensified doubts among the political elites of these states over the reliability of American military support. The most striking manifestation of Washington's approach was the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in summer 2021, which appeared somewhat chaotic in the perception

of Arab state elites. However, in recent years, there have been situations where the United States deployed additional forces to the region when its allies faced direct threats. In particular, following the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in 2023 and after the deteriorating situation in Lebanon, the U.S. strengthened its direct military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf area, reaffirming security guarantees to its key ally.

Notably, this shift in emphasis has occurred in the policies of not only the United States but also other extra-regional players. Although the Middle East Quartet of international mediators has effectively been non-functional for some time, after Hamas's attack on Israel in October 2023 and the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it became even more evident that extra-regional actors cannot exert significant influence on regional players or compel them to participate in the political settlement process. The exception has been China's strengthened political role, which in 2023 facilitated the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations, and in 2024 helped reconcile Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Fatah. However, China's Middle East policy remains organized around the goal of building economic relations with countries in the region. Russia has also begun to place somewhat different emphases in its Middle East foreign policy, which was noticeable including in the events in Syria in November-December 2024.

According to Andrey Zeltyn, the somewhat reduced external presence in recent years has encouraged Arab states to adjust their foreign policy priorities and develop independent trajectories of thinking and conceptualizing their foreign policy. The idea that Middle Eastern problems can and should be resolved through the efforts of regional players has gained popularity among the political elites of Arab countries. This was reflected in the rapprochement between some Arab states and Israel (certainly before October 7, 2023), which increasingly began to "replace" the United States in certain aspects of shaping the regional security system, particularly in missile defense and air defense.⁷⁶ However, Arab state aspirations for independence in resolving regional issues often face the challenge of mutual distrust and the need to involve external mediators as balancers and guarantors of agreements.

As Alexander Yakovlev notes, several Arab states are seeking to strengthen their authority not only at the regional level but also globally.

These countries recognize the limitations of their ability to become global powers but strive to demonstrate their own interests in the international arena, expressing their intention to move beyond the regional agenda and participate in addressing global issues related to, for example, global warming or the resolution of international conflicts.⁷⁷ For instance, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Algeria have sought to act as facilitators in negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, highlighting their ambitions to participate in conflict resolution as mediators. The Arab League has also offered its mediation services and a platform for negotiations.

⁷⁶ Interview with Andrey Zeltyn.

⁷⁷ Interview with Alexander Yakovlev.

One of the growing trends in the foreign policy of Arab states is their greater involvement in multilateral cooperation formats. This includes organizations with a regional focus: the Arab League, the GCC and the African Union. Within the GCC, member countries establish strategic dialogues both with individual states (such as the U.S., China, Russia and India) and with unions (EU) and groups (Central Asian countries).

Additionally, in recent years Arab states have been developing cooperation within organizations and associations whose focus extends beyond the Middle East and North Africa: the UN, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). BRICS also attracts some Arab countries as a potential platform for economic interaction, although their interest in the political agenda of the association is limited. The participation of Arab states in international associations allows them to promote their agenda in new forums and strengthen their image in the international arena.

The aspiration of Arab countries to play an increasingly independent role in regional and global processes may lead to a diminished role for external players in political processes in the Middle East. Nevertheless, some extra-regional actors may attempt to strengthen their positions. For example, it is quite likely that the United States will continue to facilitate the political settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, including by involving its allies among Arab states in this process.

By increasing their activity in the international arena and developing institutional formats for interaction, Arab countries seek not only to strengthen their positions but also to contribute to the stabilization and development of the region. At the same time, their course towards independence is accompanied by a search for a balance between regional cooperation and interaction with extra-regional partners.

Diversifying Arab State and Extra-Regional Actor Relations

Among the key trends characterizing the foreign policy of most Arab states is the desire to diversify their connections with extra-regional players. Notably, in several cases this involves not only economic interaction but also cooperation in certain sensitive spheres such as high technology, military-technical fields, nuclear energy and others.

There is no noticeable diversification when it comes to the military presence of extra-regional actors. However, in some instances, there is an intensification of military contacts with new external partners, most prominently demonstrated by the UAE.

As Vladimir Orlov notes, in some instances Arab governments do not seek to reduce their reliance on the United States in the military-political sphere by developing relations with other external partners but rather use the United States as one of several counterweights to the influence of other extra-regional actors. For example, cooperation with the U.S. is viewed in Morocco partly as a counterbalance to French influence, while in Algeria it serves as a tool for balancing contacts with Russia and China.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Interview with Vladimir Orlov.

Partnership with the United States maintains its significance in matters related to economic development. However, alongside this, there is an ongoing process of seeking new partners willing to support the economic development of Arab countries and help stabilize the regional situation.

China is perceived in Arab countries as one of the key players capable of balancing U.S. influence in the Middle East. Beijing is viewed primarily as a source of investment and technology, as well as a potential partner in implementing major economic projects, and only in specific cases (such as in Syria before the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad) as a source of possible political support. At the same time, China is seen by Arab states as a relatively new actor in the Middle East, having become actively involved in the region only recently. The launch of the global Belt and Road Initiative should be highlighted as a new phase in Chinese-Arab cooperation, through which Beijing has started to more actively develop economic cooperation with Arab countries.

However, China's growing economic presence raises concerns among Arab countries about becoming dependent on Beijing. Regional political elites believe that developing relations with China serves their economic development goals, but the accompanying political influence sometimes causes apprehension about the potential loss of control. These concerns are particularly strong among the political elites of North African countries, who take note of the example of certain African states whose dependence, in the view of Arab elites, has become quite substantial.

In this context, New Delhi serves as an additional element in diversifying relations with extra-regional players, but India's influence in the region remains quite limited. India is not viewed as an alternative to the United States either economically or in security matters, and its investments in the region lag significantly behind China's. Moreover, India's economic cooperation with Middle Eastern countries is predominantly focused on the Persian Gulf states. In some cases, Arab countries may consider New Delhi as one of the counterweights to Beijing's growing economic influence, but this is more an exception rather than a stable trend. Boris Dolgov points out that, according to Arab elites, the violation of Muslim rights in India is becoming a negative factor in building relations with New Delhi.⁷⁹

Arab states also consider how extra-regional players interact with third countries and non-state actors when developing their relations. For example, despite the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations and reduced rivalry between the Arabian monarchies and Tehran, the strengthening of military-political cooperation between an extra-regional player and Iran may in some cases be assessed by Arab countries as disrupting the regional balance of power. Another example could be the contacts between extra-regional actors and the Palestinian movement Hamas. While in Qatar these would be perceived rather positively, several other Arab countries (for example, Algeria) might view such interaction differently, as it contradicts their traditional support for the Palestinian National Authority.

⁷⁹ Interview with Boris Dolgov.

When building cooperation with external players, Arab countries also consider how extra-regional actors interact with each other. For instance, Algeria considers the friendly nature of India's relations with Russia when developing partnership with India. In turn, Saudi Arabia considers the state of U.S.–China relations while developing cooperation with China. There is reason to believe that should confrontation between Beijing and Washington intensify, Saudi-Chinese cooperation would develop less dynamically.

Through the diversification of external relations, Arab countries in some cases seek to strengthen their negotiating positions in dialogue with other extra-regional actors. This policy allows them to gain additional benefits from traditional external partners.

Overall, the diversification of ties with extra-regional actors is perceived by Arab elites as an opportunity to build a more balanced foreign policy.

At the same time, while seeking to reduce their dependence on traditional external partners, Arab states would not want to fall under the excessive influence of “new partners.” Arab countries strive to control their strategic resources and avoid the domination of external actors in national projects; by diversifying external connections, they aim to strike a balance between strategic interests aimed at strengthening sovereignty and pragmatism that allows economic benefits from developing cooperation with various extra-regional partners.

Economic Pragmatism in Dealings with Extra-Regional Actors

Economic development and improving the quality of life remain fundamental objectives for Arab countries. This is why economic cooperation continues to be the key focus for most Arab states in their interactions with extra-regional actors. Pragmatism in choosing partners is evident in their orientation towards countries with high living standards, stable political environments and sustainable economic systems. Arab elites seek to develop cooperation with extra-regional actors that will contribute to the long-term development of national economies, including the adoption of management practices.

Arab countries are interested in strengthening partnerships with extra-regional powers, as they expect that developing economic cooperation will enable them to reform their national economies, modernize technologically and secure additional financial resources.

In the 2010s, several Arab countries launched national development programs, with the most notable examples being Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 in Egypt and Vision 2040 in Oman. Although each of these programs emphasize different aspects of development, they are all fundamentally based on diversifying national economies, reforming socio-economic structures, modernizing infrastructure, attracting investment and enhancing state resilience to internal and external challenges. For instance, the National Energy Strategy and National Hydrogen Strategy implemented in the UAE aim to increase the share of renewable energy sources in the energy sector.

The launch of China's global Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 coincided with the adoption of several national development programs in the Middle East, becoming a significant driver of Sino-Arab economic relations. China views the Middle East as an important logistical hub and a key source of energy resources. Its initiatives attract Arab states through their emphasis on long-term investments in infrastructure and industrial projects. In Egypt, for example, China has established itself as a powerful yet demanding partner capable of supporting projects in energy, transport, trade, construction and industry.

The prospect of being included in large-scale goods flows as a transit zone appeals to Arab countries, which they expect will serve as an important driver for their economic development. Overall, transport infrastructure projects are playing an increasingly significant role in Arab state cooperation with extra-regional actors, and the desire to be integrated into global logistics flows is becoming an increasingly important direction in their foreign policy.

In this context, the new IMEC project proposed on the sidelines of the G20 summit in September 2023 proves also important. While this initiative finds understanding and even approval among some Arab elites, its effectiveness for them is not yet clear. The escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in 2023 reduced the priority of implementing the IMEC – both due to Israel's participation in this project and because of the overall deterioration of the regional situation. Nevertheless, Arab states will likely continue to show interest in developing ties with India and other extra-regional actors in the long term on issues related to realizing their transit potential. It is possible that work on the IMEC project will resume immediately after the end of the conflict in the Gaza Strip.

One of the priority areas in the economic partnership between Arab countries and extra-regional players remains cooperation in the technological sphere; this can allow them not only to modernize their economies but also to strengthen their image as technologically advanced states. In this regard, not only major extra-regional actors such as the United States and India are considered as possible sources of innovative solutions, but also other countries – the Republic of Korea, Japan, EU member states and others. An illustrative example is the UAE, which chose the Republic of Korea as a contractor for the construction of a nuclear power plant. In addition to the energy sector, cooperation in space, medicine and several other areas is becoming increasingly important for Arab states. Russia is of great interest to Arab countries in terms of cooperation in fields such as nuclear energy, space, pipeline and railway construction, agriculture and medicine.

Ensuring food security also remains an important task for Arab countries, particularly relevant for the states of North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean – here, this issue is of greater importance given the challenging socio-economic situation in certain countries.

Overall, the development of sustainable food supply chains, the introduction of agricultural technologies and other tools to strengthen food security will remain one of the priority areas for cooperation between Arab states and extra-regional partners in the foreseeable future.

Thus, the economic cooperation of Arab countries with extra-regional actors is multifaceted, covering areas such as energy, transport, technology, food security, industry and many others. Interaction with countries like China, India, Russia, the United States, the Republic of Korea, Japan, as well as the EU, is based on a pragmatic approach and aims to ensure sustainable economic growth and modernization of national economies.

Arab State and Extra-Regional Actor Cooperation in Containing Regional Threats

Despite their ambition to play a greater role in ensuring regional security, Arab states are not only unwilling to abandon extra-regional partners but, in some cases, actively engage them to contain various threats.

In the view of political elites in Arab countries that are allied with the United States, Washington still plays a key role in ensuring regional security. Several Arabian monarchies have defense agreements with the United States that were concluded after the 1990 Gulf War, providing them with certain security guarantees from Washington. For GCC countries, U.S. participation in maintaining air defense and missile defense systems, as well as ensuring naval security in the Persian Gulf region, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, is of great importance. The U.S. military presence includes bases in Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Oman. These bases are perceived by Arab countries as a kind of security guarantee in case of external threats. The exception is the Al-Tanf military base in Syria, which was established in that country contrary to the position of the official government in power at that time.

As Elena Melkumyan notes, in recent years it was believed that the main purpose of maintaining military bases in the Arabian monarchies was to counter Iran's regional policy, but after the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations in 2023, the emphasis has somewhat shifted. Nevertheless, Arab State interests in security cooperation with the United States remains high. For instance, Saudi Arabia seeks to obtain additional security guarantees comparable to NATO commitments.⁸⁰ However, Washington is trying to link the conclusion of a new agreement with Saudi Arabia to the possible normalization of Saudi-Israeli relations, the likelihood of which remains rather low in the short and medium term due to the war in Gaza.

In addition to maintaining a direct military presence in several Arab countries, the United States provides military aid to Egypt amounting to \$1.3 billion annually⁸¹ and maintains allied relations with Morocco and Tunisia. For Morocco, U.S. support is of great importance in the context of its rivalry with Algeria and the struggle against POLISARIO forces in Western Sahara.

Several other extra-regional actors remain important for Arab states in terms of security cooperation. For instance, the UAE adopts a more diversified approach, building relations not only with the U.S. but also with other countries, including

⁸⁰ Interview with Elena Melkumyan.

⁸¹ U.S. Grants Egypt \$1.3 Billion in Military Aid, Overriding Rights Conditions // Reuters. September 12, 2024.
URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-administration-grants-egypt-13-billion-military-aid-despite-rights-2024-09-11/>

France, the UK and Russia. Egypt is developing cooperation with India in arms supplies and joint military exercises.

According to Ibragim Ibragimov, Russia attracts Arab state attention as an independent and significant player that maintains good relations with all regional states. This strengthens its position and enables it to act effectively as a mediator. This approach has been demonstrated in facilitating negotiations between opposing sides in complex conflicts, such as those in Libya and Syria, mediating Syrian-Turkish talks, as well as restoring Syria's diplomatic ties with Arab countries and reinstating its membership in the Arab League. Russia actively employs energy diplomacy (particularly through OPEC+ engagement), offering Arab states favorable terms for cooperation.⁸² It is also significant that, despite the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, Russia has so far maintained its military presence in Syria, although the future of Russian bases in the country remains uncertain. Furthermore, security cooperation with Russia remains limited due to the risk of U.S. sanctions and the potential downgrading of military-political collaboration.

China's political role in the Middle East has somewhat increased, as Beijing has acted as a mediator in the Saudi-Iranian agreement to normalize bilateral relations. China's support for dialogue between Palestinian factions is also significant, which led to the signing of an agreement between Fatah and Hamas on "ending the years-long division" and "strengthening Palestinian unity." Additionally, there have been reports of intensified contacts between some Arabian monarchies (particularly the UAE) and China in the military sphere. Nevertheless, the level of Arab state security cooperation with China remains incomparable to their collaboration with the United States in this area.

In several cases, Arab countries are interested in cooperating with extra-regional partners on issues related to containing other regional threats. For example, Morocco collaborates with European authorities in combating drug trafficking and illegal migration. Furthermore, Arab states interact with extra-regional powers on issues related to countering terrorist threats. Such interaction includes not only information exchanges, but also joint exercises and operations aimed at eliminating terrorists (particularly within the framework of U.S.–Iraq cooperation).

Meanwhile, the region still faces threats where the role of extra-regional actors remains limited. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in military activity by non-state and quasi-state actors, which in some cases has noticeably influenced regional dynamics. For instance, attacks by the Yemeni Ansar Allah movement on transport vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have affected not only the economic situation in certain countries (particularly Egypt) but also global supply chains. Hezbollah's shelling of Israeli territory from Lebanon led to conflict escalation and an Israeli operation in Lebanese territory, resulting in increased confrontation with Iran. In this case, the ability of extra-regional actors to contain regional threats was quite limited.

Given these challenges, Arab countries pay special attention to cooperation with extra-regional powers to contain regional threats. The United States remains the

⁸² Interview with Ibragim Ibragimov.

main extra-regional ally for a significant number of Arab states. At the same time, some Arab countries adhere to a more diversified approach and cooperate in the security sphere with other extra-regional actors as well.

Non-Arab States

Non-Arab state perceptions of extra-regional actors in the Middle East exhibits somewhat different approaches.

Iran's Main Priorities in Building Relations with Extra-Regional Powers

The United States continues to remain as Iran's doctrinal, military and political adversary. The anti-American orientation of Tehran's foreign policy remains one of the foundational principles of the Islamic Republic's state ideology. Nevertheless, part of the Iranian elite believes that under certain conditions, a reduction in tensions with Washington may be possible.

As Elena Dunaeva notes, the Iranian economy needs substantial investment and technological modernization to overcome the crisis, develop further and raise living standards. However, under sanctions pressure, opportunities to attract investment and acquire new technology remain limited. Liberal-centrist and moderate-conservative circles in Iran link the solution to these challenges with the lifting of sanctions and improved relations with the U.S. and EU. The country also maintains interest in engaging with other extra-regional players such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, India and Southeast Asian countries.⁸³

Vladimir Sazhin draws attention to the fact that since 2016, following the beginning of the sanctions relief process under the “nuclear deal,” cooperation between Iran and the EU intensified. This involved numerous economic sectors such as the oil and gas industry, automotive manufacturing, chemical industry and air transport. At that time, foreign investments became an important driver of economic growth for the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, after the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2018 and the imposition of U.S. sanctions, European countries were forced to support these restrictions, which effectively nullified the achievements in developing economic relations.⁸⁴

The election of Masoud Pezeshkian – who holds reformist views – as Iran's president in 2024, created opportunities for reducing conflict in Iran–U.S. relations. Notably, even after the start of Israel's operation against Hezbollah in Lebanon, Masoud Pezeshkian expressed his desire to establish dialogue with the U.S. and other global powers about resuming negotiations regarding the “nuclear deal.”⁸⁵

However, two important factors influence the desire of some Iranian elites to negotiate with the United States. The first is the escalation of the Iran–Israel

⁸³ Interview with Elena Dunaeva.

⁸⁴ Interview with Vladimir Sazhin.

⁸⁵ Gaza Crisis Reveals 'True Nature' of Israeli Regime, Iranian President Says // UN News. September 24, 2024.
URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154841>

confrontation, which in 2024 led to a direct exchange of strikes between the two states. Given the alliance between U.S. and Israel, such escalation serves as a serious constraint on any possible reduction of tensions in Tehran-Washington relations. The second factor is the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, who will likely pursue a tougher policy towards Iran compared to the one implemented by the Biden administration. Iran expects increased pressure, potentially manifested through stricter sanctions and greater support for Israel. These factors limit the Iranian moderate desires to soften anti-U.S. rhetoric and present significant obstacles to any possible reduction of tensions in relations with the United States.

In the current circumstances, China occupies a key position in Iran's economic and foreign policy strategy. China is the largest investor in the Iranian economy, which is particularly important for Tehran under continued sanctions pressure.

China remains a significant player in various sectors of Iran's economy, including oil refining, automobile manufacturing, copper production and others. Additionally, Beijing and Tehran are actively developing trade and economic cooperation. It is also important that on several regional issues, China provides Iran with some political support, which is of great significance to the Islamic Republic.

In 2020, Iran and China signed a 25-year strategic partnership agreement, viewed by both sides as a significant milestone in the development of bilateral relations. Nevertheless, the implementation of the agreement is currently minimal. Iran-China economic interaction is constrained partly by sanctions risks, which the Chinese side seeks to minimize.

Iran would like to realize its transit potential and hopes for significant participation in infrastructure projects within China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, the Iran's elite believe that Chinese projects benefit Beijing more than Tehran itself.

Iran views India as a crucial trade and economic partner, particularly under current sanctions. Economic cooperation between Iran and India continues to develop actively. For instance, in 2024, an agreement was signed on the joint operation of Iran's Chabahar port and on attracting Indian investments for developing port infrastructure.

However, the Islamic Republic is wary about the prospects of implementing the IMEC international transport corridor project, which bypasses Iran. There is a popular view that the implementation of this project could strengthen the role of Israel and Saudi Arabia in regional economic processes, causing some concern in Tehran.

Sanctions imposed against Russia and Iran are bringing the two countries closer together in both economic and political spheres. However, trade and economic contacts are mainly limited to large state projects and rarely involve the private sector. For Iran, developing financial cooperation with Russia is important, as well as collaboration in space, energy and several other areas.

Thus, Iran would like to establish constructive engagement with the U.S. and EU, but the current political situation restricts this aspiration. Under these circumstances, Tehran seeks to develop relations with other players, but the threat of

secondary sanctions reduces opportunities for cooperation in several key areas. The IRI continues to seek partners capable of supporting its economic development and technological modernization. However, risks of escalation in the Iran-Israel confrontation and possible adjustments to U.S. foreign policy could potentially increase pressure on Tehran and force the Islamic Republic to adopt the position of an active observer.

Israel's Relations with Major Extra-Regional Actors

The State of Israel builds cooperation with various extra-regional actors, while viewing the United States as a strategic partner with whom the Jewish state has developed “special relations.” Israel emphasizes the unique nature of U.S.-Israeli relations, which are based on a solid foundation of mutual support. The U.S. is considered an ally regardless of which administration is in power – Republican or Democratic. The strategic nature of bilateral relations prevents them from reaching a crisis point even in cases where the parties have different views on addressing regional agenda issues.

Israel is interested in maintaining a U.S. military presence in the region and in U.S. participation in agreements normalizing relations with Arab states. In particular, the country positively assesses the role of the U.S. in concluding the “Abraham Accords” in 2020, through which the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco established official relations with the Jewish state. The Israeli political elite would like the U.S. to participate more actively in normalizing relations with Riyadh. According to the experts interviewed, if a deal is successfully concluded and official relations established between Saudi Arabia and Israel, the regional position of the U.S. could be significantly strengthened. However, it is necessary to consider that the prospects for normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia appear unclear, at least until the end of hostilities in the Gaza Strip.

The events of 2023–2024 showed that, despite differing approaches to solving some regional security problems, the U.S. consistently supported Israel at critically important moments for the Jewish state. For example, after the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the start of the war in Gaza, Washington provided substantial military and political support to its ally, sending additional forces to the Middle East.

According to Luiza Khlebnikova of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the optimization of the Middle East policy carried out by Washington raises Israel concerns that the United States is seeking to redirect its attention and resources toward the Asia-Pacific region. In the view of the Israeli political elite, this could weaken U.S. participation in ensuring the security of its key ally in the Middle East. Israel expects greater certainty and a tougher position from the U.S. on key issues, such as pressure on Iran.⁸⁶

Israel has mixed perceptions of Chinese policy in the Middle East. On the one hand, economic cooperation with China is actively developing, especially in areas

⁸⁶ Interview with Luiza Khlebnikova.

such as technology and infrastructure. Israel seeks to attract additional Chinese investments into the country's economy. On the other hand, China supports the Palestinian side in the current conflict, which somewhat concerns the Jewish state. As Dmitry Maryasis notes, Israel has taken notice of China's role in facilitating reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023. The normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations ran counter to Israeli interests, as it reduced the level of confrontation between Arab states and Tehran, Israel's main adversary.

Furthermore, the Israeli elite viewed China's involvement in reconciling the main Palestinian factions with caution.⁸⁷ Despite this, Israel maintains the position of an active observer regarding China's regional policy and prefers to develop economic and political ties with China independent of each other.

Israel would like to maintain neutral relations with Russia. At the same time, Russia's cooperation with Iran, as well as its contacts with Hamas and Hezbollah, cause concern. Nevertheless, the Israeli political elite continues to seek ways to maintain constructive relations with Russia.

As Liudmila Samarskaia notes, Israel's economic cooperation with the EU is extensive and stable, but political disagreements regarding the Palestinian issue seriously complicate relations. Despite constructive interaction with individual member states, Israel generally does not view the EU as an ally.⁸⁸

India is viewed by Israel as an important economic and military partner. Military-technical cooperation with New Delhi is of great importance to the Jewish state. In addition to arms trade, engagement in this sphere includes joint military manufacturing. The strengthening of bilateral relations was also facilitated by India's condemnation of the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. The two countries are developing cooperation within multilateral formats, particularly the I2U2 group, which also includes the UAE and the U.S. Additionally, Israel is interested in participating in the IMEC transport corridor project, viewing it as an opportunity to establish connections with Arab states.

Notably, Israel does not view India as a counterbalance to China. At the same time, the United States prefers that its ally develops relations with India rather than China. For example, the United States has hindered the development of Chinese-Israeli cooperation in the military sphere, which partly accelerated the development of cooperation between Israel and India in this field.

Therefore, Israel seeks to build constructive relations with extra-regional actors. By developing cooperation with different extra-regional partners, the country pursues different goals. For instance, with China and the EU, Israel aims to develop economic cooperation, trying to "separate" it from political disagreements. With Russia, the country attempts to maintain neutral relations despite differing views on resolving several issues on the regional agenda. Relations with the United States are strategic and fundamentally important to Israel in terms of ensuring the security of the Jewish state. In its interaction with India,

⁸⁷ Interview with Dmitry Maryasis.

⁸⁸ Interview with Liudmila Samarskaia.

Israel seeks to develop both economic partnership and cooperation in the military-political sphere.

Turkey's Main Approaches to Engaging with Extra-Regional Partners

Turkey's relations with the United States are characterized by contradictions related to Washington's Middle East policy. Turkey dislikes the support that the U.S. provides to Kurdish groups in Syria, including those within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Ankara associates to the Kurdistan Workers Party, banned in Turkey. Turkey has repeatedly called on the U.S. to stop supporting the SDF, as it considers Kurdish groups to be terrorist organizations that threaten its territorial integrity.

Ankara is also dissatisfied with the U.S. policy regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Washington's support for Israel contradicts Turkey's official position, which advocates for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Turkey believes that U.S. actions hinder the peaceful resolution of the conflict and could lead to instability in the Middle East.

Furthermore, Turkey is concerned about the U.S. military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea, which Ankara considers zones of its strategic influence. This negative perception is reinforced by active U.S. engagement with Turkey's rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Israel, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. In 2022, the United States lifted the arms embargo on Cyprus, which provoked a negative reaction from the Turkish Republic. The involvement of U.S. companies in gas field development off the coast of Cyprus is perceived by Turkey as a threat to its national interests.

According to Alina Vernigora, despite some tensions in bilateral relations, Turkey recognizes the necessity of U.S. cooperation in both security and economic spheres. In the view of the Turkish elite, a potential deterioration in relations with Washington would cause greater damage to Turkey than to the U.S., and Ankara would like to avoid such a scenario.⁸⁹

China is perceived by Turkey as an important economic partner. The Republic of Turkey aims to utilize its transit potential and positions itself as an important transport hub for international projects. From Ankara's perspective, cooperation within China's global Belt and Road Initiative appears particularly important. However, interaction with China is not without problems. Turkey is interested in participating in major infrastructure projects in the region, but Ankara's interests are undermined by Beijing's preference for using its own personnel resources to implement such projects.

Although Turkey demonstrates a positive attitude towards Chinese investments and logistics initiatives, Ankara remains wary of Beijing's regional policy, which is especially significant in the context of Turkey's NATO membership. Meanwhile, Ankara seeks to benefit from the rivalry between China and the U.S. in the Middle East, strengthening its negotiating position in dialogue with Washington.

⁸⁹ Interview with Alina Vernigora

Currently, the Turkish elite does not consider the Uyghur issue to be a stumbling block in relations between Ankara and Beijing. Notably, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan visited the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in June 2024, during which he stated that Turkey would not interfere in China's internal affairs.⁹⁰

Relations with Russia hold a special place in Turkish foreign policy. For Turkey, adding extra weight to its policy at the global level is particularly important. Ankara seeks to strengthen its position on the world stage, including through negotiations on UN reform, which potentially includes the possibility of Turkey gaining permanent membership in the Security Council. In this context, the Turkish elite counts on Russia's assistance in strengthening its position. Another example is Turkey's participation as a mediator in Russian-Ukrainian negotiations and the implementation of the "grain deal," which has also helped to strengthen the country's role not only at the regional but also at the global level. Given the importance of relations with Moscow, Ankara tries to avoid initiatives that could lead to a significant deterioration in bilateral relations.

Turkey's interest in BRICS is also linked to its desire to play a more prominent role in world politics. Despite the prospects for developing economic cooperation within the association, Turkey recognizes the weakness of its institutional structure and does not yet have a clear understanding of the possible benefits of participating in BRICS.

In recent years, economic cooperation between Russia and Turkey has significantly strengthened, most notably in the realm of trade and economic collaboration. Nevertheless, unresolved issues remain in bilateral economic relations, particularly concerning banking transactions and the lack of an effective solution for establishing a gas hub in Turkey.

Relations between Turkey and the European Union remain predominantly constructive in nature. Turkey's EU accession process is effectively frozen due to political disagreements between Ankara and Brussels. At the same time, the parties manage to resolve several issues where they find common ground. For instance, in 2016 Turkey committed to containing migration flows in exchange for financial assistance from the EU, although Ankara's expenditure on crisis management exceeds the support received.

Regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Turkey criticizes the EU's insufficient involvement in what Turkey considers a "fair" settlement of the situation, as well as the recognition of Hamas as a terrorist organization, which contradicts Ankara's position. Despite this, the EU remains an important partner for Turkey, and relations between the parties do not deteriorate into crisis.

According to Amur Gadzhiev, the dynamics of Turkey-India relations can hardly be called positive, largely due to Ankara's support for Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. Regular joint military exercises between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Pakistan reinforce the perception of Ankara as an ally of Islamabad. In turn, India's conclusion of

⁹⁰ Dincer, S.D. Turkish Foreign Minister Discusses Economic Ties, Global Issues during China Visit // Anadolu. June 6, 2024. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkish-foreign-minister-discusses-economic-ties-global-issues-during-china-visit/3241559>

defense agreements with Greece and Cyprus elicits a negative response from the Turkish side.⁹¹

Turkey is skeptical about the initiation of the IMEC transport project, which bypasses Turkish territory. Turkish President Recep Erdogan has repeatedly emphasized his country's transit potential, promoting Ankara's participation in logistics projects.

Overall, Turkey builds relations with various extra-regional actors, seeking to realize its strategic ambitions as not only a regional but also a global player. Particularly important to Ankara is the factor of extra-regional power relations with actors with whom Turkey has tensions, such as Greece, Cyprus, Israel and the Syrian Democratic Forces, which consist predominantly of Kurdish militias. Turkey tries to maintain constructive relations with its extra-regional partners, but in cases of political disagreements, it can firmly defend its position. However, even though contradictions do emerge, Turkey endeavors to prevent a significant deterioration in its relations with extra-regional actors.

Conclusions

Current trends in Arab state foreign policies demonstrate a desire for greater autonomy while maintaining the significant role of extra-regional actors. Arab states are taking steps to diversify their foreign relations, adopting a pragmatic approach in choosing partners, which allows them to balance between different extra-regional players. Economic cooperation remains one of the key areas of their interaction with external partners, especially in technology, energy, food security and transport infrastructure. Nevertheless, Arab countries are cautious in their attempts to reduce dependence on traditional partners and avoid excessive influence from "new" ones.

Containing regional threats remains an important aspect of cooperation with extra-regional partners. Arab states continue to rely on U.S. support in the military sphere, yet they are taking steps to strengthen their own contribution to regional security, highlighting their quest for greater independence. Meanwhile, the U.S. maintains a key role as the security guarantor in the region, although the optimization of the U.S. Middle East policy raises doubts about its reliability among allies.

Non-Arab Middle Eastern states, such as Iran, Israel and Turkey, demonstrate somewhat different approaches to their interaction with extra-regional actors. Part of the Iranian elite would like to normalize relations with the U.S. and EU, but due to unfavorable political circumstances, Iran is forced to focus on cooperation with China and other partners capable of supporting its economic development under sanctions pressure. Israel continues to strengthen its strategic relationship with the U.S., while simultaneously developing economic ties with other extra-regional powers. The country is wary of the support given by certain extra-regional partners to its adversaries, but still tries to develop constructive relations with them, attempting to minimize the impact of political disagreements. Turkey seeks to use

⁹¹ Interview with Amur Gadzhiev.

connections with extra-regional actors to strengthen its role not only as a regional but also as a global player. The country strives to build pragmatic relations with extra-regional partners despite political disagreements and competition.

Overall, the approach of Middle Eastern countries demonstrates an intention to build more pragmatic and balanced relations with extra-regional powers. The desire of Middle Eastern states to solve regional problems faces the need to attract additional means – both economic resources and military-political and diplomatic support – from extra-regional partners. In sum, one can assume that despite a possible decline in the role of extra-regional actors in Middle East political processes, this role will remain significant in the foreseeable future.

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Amur Gadzhiev, Senior Researcher at the Center for Middle East Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS.

Boris Dolgov, Leading Researcher at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS.

Elena Dunaeva, Senior Researcher at the Center for Middle East Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS.

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Elena Melkumyan, Leading Researcher at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS.

Vladimir Orlov, Professor at the Department of Middle and Near East History, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Vladimir Sazhin, Senior Researcher at the Center for Middle East Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS.

Liudmila Samarskaia, Head of the Regional Relations Study Group, Center for Middle East Studies, IMEMO RAS.

Luiza Khlebnikova, Associate Professor at the Department of Jewish Studies, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Alexander Yakovlev, Chief Researcher at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS.

Conclusions

Throughout history, the Middle East has repeatedly become an arena of confrontation between leading world powers. Despite the end of the colonial era and the Cold War period, the Middle East remains a region where the interests of major extra-regional players collide. In this context, it seems important to prevent the transfer of confrontation between individual global powers to the region.

Mutual distrust and confrontation between global players complicate the development of collective solutions and impede progress in creating a regional security system, as well as in promoting sustainable development in Middle Eastern countries. Moreover, attempts by international organizations and individual powers to help resolve crises face limited effectiveness due to the lack of necessary internal conditions for their settlement.

The transfer of global confrontation to the regional level may also manifest in hypothetical pressure from certain extra-regional actors on Middle Eastern countries to hinder their cooperation with other nations. Such a development poses a serious threat to the long-term stability of the region.

Recent events, such as the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the war between Israel and Hezbollah, and the intensification of Iranian-Israeli confrontation, demonstrate the fragility of the situation in the region. Despite reports of a possible ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, it is premature to speak of a long-term settlement of the conflict. The situation in the Middle East remains conflictual and is exacerbated by changes in the regional balance of power. For instance, Iran, which traditionally held one of the leading positions in the Middle East, faced a series of military and political setbacks in 2024, weakening its influence and leading to an even greater imbalance in its confrontation with Israel.

The Syrian settlement issue demonstrates that despite shared interests among external players – particularly in preventing the country's collapse, countering extremism and improving Syria's humanitarian situation – their cooperation is complicated by mutual distrust. Global confrontation and political disagreements make joint actions in Syria difficult.

The recent attempts by EU diplomacy to engage with the new Syrian authorities serve as the latest clear illustration of this situation. As early as mid-December 2024, EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas stated at a press conference following a foreign ministers meeting in Brussels that one of the main conditions for dialogue should be the reduction of Russian influence in Damascus, including the removal of Russian military bases in the country. This position was later confirmed by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock during her visit to Damascus. Such obsessive fixation on the “Russian presence” cannot help but surprise, especially considering that Brussels should have many other issues, more significant for EU countries, to discuss with the Syrian leadership – the future fate of Syrian refugees in Europe, prospects for forming a representative government and constitutional reforms, women's rights and the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, massive

Israeli strikes on Syrian military infrastructure, etc. One can only hope that sooner or later Brussels will be able to approach its priorities more rationally and thoughtfully regarding both Syria and the Middle East region as a whole.

Major external powers demonstrate limited willingness to take responsibility for the region's future. The United States, traditionally playing the role of the main security guarantor in the Middle East, is optimizing its regional policy, which is manifested in reducing its military presence and military-political activity where the White House deems appropriate. The United States seeks to concentrate its attention and available resources on the Asia-Pacific region and on confrontation with China, making the Middle East a secondary priority in U.S. foreign policy. China is strengthening its position through economic initiatives, including within the Belt and Road Initiative, but its political presence in the region remains insignificant so far. Russia, drawing on its historical experience of military-political cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, is trying to maintain its influence in the region, but its capabilities to promote political stabilization of the regional situation also appear limited. The EU's interests lie in developing trade and economic ties with Middle Eastern states and contributing to security; however, interaction in containing regional threats also remains limited in nature. India has historically deep connections with Middle Eastern countries, yet its presence in the region remains incomparable with other major external actors, except in certain areas of cooperation.

In this context, Arab countries are striving to strengthen their independence and diversify their foreign policy ties, which has become an important step towards reinforcing their positions both regionally and globally. Arab states, in developing their strategies, demonstrate a balanced approach aimed at maximizing economic benefits and reducing dependence on traditional partners. This course reflects efforts to achieve a balance between strengthening sovereignty and pragmatism in relations with major extra-regional actors.

Iran, under sanctions pressure, is building relations with China and other partners to avoid international isolation. At the same time, part of the Iranian elite would like to negotiate with the U.S. and other global players to resolve the Islamic Republic's "nuclear issue" and lift economic sanctions. Israel maintains its strategic partnership with the U.S. while simultaneously developing relations with other extra-regional actors. In cases where Israel's views on regional agenda issues differ from those of its extra-regional partners, the country seeks to prevent political disagreements from affecting economic cooperation. Turkey, for its part, is attempting to realize its ambitions not only as a regional but also as a global player. Ankara develops pragmatic relations with extra-regional partners and, when contradictions arise, can defend its interests while remaining committed to preventing relations from deteriorating to a crisis state.

Overall, regional powers are working towards developing balanced policies that simultaneously strengthen sovereignty, gain economic benefits from cooperation with external actors and minimize potential risks. This process will likely have a noticeable impact on the dynamics of Middle East development amidst global changes.

However, countries in the region are not yet ready to take full responsibility for solving their own problems. Therefore, the influence of extra-regional actors remains significant, and the continued prominent role of external players in the region's political and economic processes appears natural and predictable. At the same time, their involvement in regional affairs remains fragmented.

Prospects for regional stability may be linked to more active and constructive external player engagement in resolving Middle East issues. Developing a long-term strategy that unites the interests of both regional and external actors could form the basis for overcoming current challenges. However, the limited resources of global powers, high levels of competition, lack of trust between key players and the complex international environment make such a scenario difficult to achieve in the near future. As a result, the Middle East remains an arena of global rivalry where local crises intertwine with the interests of external players, hindering the development of coordinated solutions and attaining long-term stability.

About the Authors

Andrey Kortunov – Ph.D. in History, RIAC Member.

Alexander Aksenok – Ph.D. in Law, Vice-President of RIAC, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation.

Alexey Davydov – Ph.D. in Political Science, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for North American Studies, IMEMO RAS.

Lida Oganisyan – Ph.D. in Political Science, Associate Professor at the School of World Politics, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Alexander Lomanov – Ph.D. in History, Deputy Director for Scientific Work, IMEMO RAS.

Alexey Kupriyanov – Ph.D. in History, Head of the Center of the Indo-Pacific Region, IMEMO RAS.

Ivan Bocharov – Program Manager at RIAC.

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Tel.: +7 (495) 225 6283
Fax: +7 (495) 225 6284
welcome@russiancouncil.ru

119049, Moscow,
8, 4th Dobryninsky pereulok

russiancouncil.ru