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The "Four Plus One":
The Changing Power Politics of the Middle East

by Joshua Krasna and George Meladze

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Abstract:

The role of the U.S. as an off- or on-shore balancer in the Middle East has decreased in the past decade. This generated a higher degree of autonomy among powerful states in the Middle East regional security complex, enabling the emergence of a multipolar regional balance of power. There are four major regional powers in the Middle East today – Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia: a fifth, Egypt, is reviving. These actors' interactions - as adversaries, friends or balancing partners - coupled with U.S. eclipse and increased Russian presence and influence, explain most political and strategic developments in the region. The major crises in the region are particularly intractable due to the overlay of regional power rivalry and balancing over local conflicts. This paper seeks to present and analyze the current power structure and balance of power in the Middle East regional security complex; examine the drivers of policy in the main regional players and the interrelationships between them; and assess the potential for future change in the regional power structure.

Keywords: Arab Spring – Middle East – regional security – balance of power – Russia – strategy

Regional Security in the Middle East: Past and Present

Until World War I, the use of the balance of power concept regarding the Middle East mostly encompassed the competition of external powers with the Ottoman Empire, or in its territories.[1] After that, it characterized the balance among colonial and external actors – including the use of regional proxies and puppets – until decolonization and the rise of the Cold War. The application of the concept in the region became more complex with the establishment of the post-World War II bipolar balance of power. Martin Indyk sees four different balances of power operative during that period (1948-1991): between the U.S. and the Soviet Union; the inter-Arab balance of power (the "Arab Cold War") between conservative, mostly monarchical Arab states and radical regimes; between the Arab states and Iran (since 1979); and between Israel and the Arab States, in which the U.S. sought to maintain Israel's advantage.[2]

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Middle East power system was characterized by American superpower hegemony, mostly enforced from offshore or through regional partners, such as the regional alliance built after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait or American support for Israel's secret war against the Iranian nuclear project. While Iraq and Iran challenged this reality, they lacked the power to develop as alternatives, and, after 1991, it was clear that the regional security structure was an American-centric one. The hard power capabilities the U.S. could project in the Middle East were greater than those of any of the powers within the region. This reality gave rise to the Egypt-Israel-Jordan-Turkey-G.C.C. regional axis, which cooperated with the U.S. containment policy towards both Iraq under Saddam and Iran, and then just Iran, until the axis largely dissolved in the second decade of this century.

But the unilateral American moment in the Middle East lasted less than a quarter of a century, until the announcement of withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2009, the Arab uprising of 2011, and as the final act, the 2015 Russian intervention in Syria. "Imperial overstretch", war fatigue, the decline of the importance of the region for vital American interests, and consequent drawing-back of American power have reduced the role of the U.S. as an off- or on-shore balancer in the Middle East.[3]

This absence of an effective hegemon led to greater autonomy among regional actors and opened the way for the emergence of a multipolar regional balance of power. This is reinforced by the fact that the Middle

[1] The balance of power is one of the oldest concepts in international relations, dating back to Thucydides' description of the coalition of city-states, led by Sparta, which sought to counter the rising power of Athens. The concept consciously motivated diplomacy and strategy in the West since the sixteenth century. Jervis claimed that it is "the best known, and perhaps the best, theory in international politics," in Robert Jervis, *System Effects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 131. According to Levy and Thompson, "there are many variations of balance-of-power theory and considerable disagreement about the meaning of its key concepts … but the central proposition of nearly all balance-of-power theories is that states tend to balance against threats of hegemony [by other states] over the system," in Jack S. Levy, and William R. Thompson "Hegemonic Threat and Great Power Balancing in Europe, 1495–2000," *Security Studies* 14:1 (January–March 2005), 1–30. The forms and tactics of balancing (alliance, emulation, bandwagoning, chain-ganging, buck-passing, etc.) vary and depend on the nature of power distribution in a system. In a multipolar system, states will balance through forming counterbalancing alliances or alignments. As Nexon notes: "hegemonies do not form in multistate systems, because perceived threats of hegemony over the system generate balancing behavior by other leading states in the system," in Daniel H. Nexon, "The Balance of Power in the Balance," *World Politics* 61:2 (April 2009), 330–359.

[2] Martyn Indyk, "Beyond the Balance of Power: America's Choice in the Middle East," *The National Interest* 26 (Winter, 1991/92).

[3] Mehran Kamrava, "Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East," *Orbis* 62:3 (Fall 2018), p. 598.

East can be described as a "region without regionalism,"[4] and lacks shared values and political structures, and effective regional norms and institutions, to enable trust, mutual understanding, and cooperation, and to manage conflict and crises, even within its Arab core. This combines with regime insecurity (from both external and internal threats), as well as a high degree of power dispersion (with no clear dominant regional power), to make power politics, suspicion, competition and interest- or coercion-based collaboration, the main idioms of inter-state relations.

In the Middle East that has emerged since the Arab uprisings in 2011, several regional actors are the leading powers in the region and view each other as adversaries, friends, or potential allies in balancing threats. The power struggles among them extend over all three sub-regions of the Middle East: from the Gulf, through the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean to Northern Africa and Sudan, and even extend southward into the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Other states and non-state actors in the region, for the most part, act in reference to these powers, as clients, proxies, or targets. The major crises in the region – Syria, Yemen, and Libya – are thus particularly intractable, due to the overlay of regional power rivalry and balancing onto local conflicts.

The region has no dominant "regional power," one whose hard and soft power capabilities significantly outweigh those of the other actors within the region and who most or all of the others accept as playing the leadership role. The Ottoman Empire was the last power from the region to achieve regional hegemony in the Middle East. While some of the region's significant actors have ambitions to be the dominant power in the region, none is powerful enough to actually prevail against the others on its own; the prevailing interaction between them as a "contracert," rather than a "concert."[5]

[4] Paul Aarts, "the Middle East: A Region without Regionalism or the End of Exceptionalism?," *Third World Quarterly* 20:5 (1999). It can also be conceived as a Regional Security Complex (RSC): a set of political units whose primary security concerns are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another. It has several relevant powers, a predominantly military-political security agenda, and is anarchic in structure, in that it neither possesses a security regime nor comprises a security community. Buzan and Wæver note that in the essential structure of an RSC stems from, alongside power relations, "patterns of amity and enmity … it is thus not enough to look at the distribution of power to predict the patterns of conflict – but also at historical hatreds and friendships, as well as specific issues that trigger conflict or cooperation." This regional level of security has become both ever more autonomous and more prominent in international politics since the end of the Cold War, and local powers have far more room for maneuver in Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Power: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 44-55.

[5] Martin Beck, "The Concept of Regional Power as Applied to the Middle East," in Henner Fürtig (ed.) *Regional Powers in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 13.

"The Four Plus One": Post-Hegemonic Multipolar Power Relations in the Middle East

There are four principal influential state actors today in the region: Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. The four-way balance of power is evident in almost every conflict and complex interaction in the region.[6] A fifth power – Egypt, the most populous and poorest – has, due to embroilment in domestic issues and re-stabilizing its political system, been over the past decade eclipsed and largely replaced as the Arab pillar by previously less prominent Saudi Arabia (allied with the United Arab Emirates - U.A.E.). But Cairo is returning to regional influence, and is already a sub-regional power in the Western Middle East (one of the three sub-regions of the Middle East, along with the Levant and the Gulf), as well as in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Nile Basin.[7]

These "Four Plus One" deploy different types of power and influence. Saudi Arabia and Iran possess energy resources that provide influence outside the region and have helped create surpluses for buying and developing both soft and other types of hard power. Turkey, Egypt, and Iran are polities with long histories, strategic locations, large populations, and sizeable militaries. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and to an extent, Turkey, have significant soft power resources for historical, cultural, and religious reasons. Iran is able to harness and make use of significant loyalty among many of the region's Shi'a and has created a strong, long-lasting alliance with Syria and Hizballah (as well as being the most influential power in Iraq). Israel is a leader militarily, technologically, and in the intelligence field, as well as by virtue of its political, military and strategic "special relationship" with the United States (and its imputed nuclear capabilities). Each of these five states "possesses some of the conditions to become a regional power … Nevertheless, the constant competition between these five countries is preventing any of them from developing into a sole regional power."[8]

Table 1: Comparative Indicators of the "4 + 1"

	Area(sq km.)	Population (million)	GDP (billion USD)	Per capita	Defense expendit-ure(billion USD)	As % of GDP	Active military
Iran	1,648,195	83.0	430	5,222	13.2	2.7	523,000
Turkey	783,562	81.3	714	8,716	19.0	2.5	355,200
KSA	2,149,690	33.0	770	23,187	67.6	8.8	227,000
Israel	21,937	8.4	366	41,180	15.9	4.3	169,500 (465,000 active reserves)
Egypt	1,001,450	99.4	249	2,572	3.1	1.2	438,500

All figures from 2018. Source: CIA, the World Factbook; IISS, The Military Balance, 2019; SIPRI (defense expenditure)

[6] Iraq, while a significant regional player in the past, is today a secondary power under substantial Iranian influence, though it is attempting to diversify its regional affiliations and take a more median position between the contending powers.

[7] Marina Calculli, "Sub-regions and Security in the Arab Middle East: 'Hierarchical Interdependence' in Gulf-Levant Relations," in Elizabeth Monier (ed)., *Regional Insecurity After the Arab Uprisings: Narratives of Security and Threat* (Houndsmills: Palgrave-Macmillan UK, 2015), p. 59; Buzan and Wæver term these same sub-regions "regional security subcomplexes," which represent distinctive patterns of security interdependence that are nonetheless caught up in a wider pattern that defines the RSC as a whole. Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers,* pp. 51-52.

[8] Mostafa El-Labbad, "Egypt: a 'Regional Reference in the Middle East", in Fürtig, ed., *Regional Powers in the Middle East,* p. 81.

One noteworthy characteristic of the current "Four Plus One" structure is that three of the most significant powers in today's regional strategic architecture are non-Arab actors on the geographical and/or social-political margins of the Arab world: Turkey, Iran, and Israel. These are what are variously referred to as 'cusp' or 'insulator' states:[9] ones on the geographical, political and/or cultural edge of what is widely believed to be an established region, and/or which straddle more than one region. Turkey, Iran, and Israel tend to regard themselves as unique, exceptional, and of ancient and separate lineage in the region; their projection of power and influence into the inter-Arab milieu is episodic. The two other members of the "Four Plus One" - Saudi Arabia and Egypt - are (historically, with Iraq) the central Arab powers: they are currently required to balance both against, and with, the "peripheral" powers. Sub-regional geography is quite significant for the balancing between the "Four Plus One." Different players are involved in different nodes of conflict and competition: not all the powers are equally engaged, or even engaged at all, in every regional conflict. Table 2 summarizes the differing degree of engagement by the "Four Plus One" in regional crises.

Table 2: Degree of Engagement of the 4+1 in regional crises

	Syria	Libya	Yemen	Gaza	Iran-Gulf	Iraq	Sahel/Horn of Africa/Red Sea
Iran	◆◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆
Turkey	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆
Saudi Arabia	◆	◆◆ (U.A.E. ◆◆◆)	◆◆◆	◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆ (U.A.E. ◆◆◆)
Israel	◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆◆	◆(◆?)	◆	◆
Egypt	◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆◆

◆◆◆ heavily engaged (one of the key players)

◆◆ significantly engaged (an important secondary or indirect player)

◆ low or no engagement

[9] Herzog and Robins, *The Role, Position and Agency of Cusp States.* The concept of is distinct from, but similar to, Buzan and Wæver's similarly useful concept of "insulator" states, which defines "a location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back", and seem to belong either to no RSC, or to several at once in Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, pp. 483-484. Both concepts bear some similarity to Özkan's concept of "pivotal middle powers": a key state able and willing to project power and influence developments beyond its borders - regionally and internationally - and to determine the fate of its region to a certain extent in Ozkan, Mehmet, "A New Approach to Global Security: Pivotal Middle Powers and Global Politics," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* (Spring 2006), 80-81. Saouli calls the influential states in the Middle East "middle powers", and proposes six attributes that may help to indicate middle power behavior: (1) A state's willingness and aspiration to transform, and interest in transforming, whatever material and normative means it possesses into real power that can be projected outside its boundaries. (2) The capacity to articulate a strategy that bridges these means to specific goals. (3) The capability to project power to different parts of the region— North Africa, Levant, and the Gulf— and to influence the power balance within and among states in the region. (4) The possession of ideological and cultural power to influence the normative (Islamist, Arabist, Nationalist, Democratic) order of the region. (5) The ability to construct and enter alliances with states and nonstate actors. (6) The ability to enable or disrupt international strategies in the region in Adham Saouli, "Middling or Meddling? Origins and Constraints of External Influence in the Middle East," in Saouli, ed., U*nfulfilled Aspirations: Middle Power Politics in the Middle East,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 15.

The rivalry between different members of the "Four Plus One" is not based solely on power politics and/or geopolitics, but also on ideology and sectarianism. Regional powers are most preoccupied with those external threats which interact with domestic stability – and therefore regime security - issues, even if they are not the strongest or the most immediate.[10] This causes "underbalancing," in which "state leaders eschew alliances that seem logical from a power, and even a sectarian, perspective, because they dislike and fear the ideological stance of a potential ally," and prevents the development of some ostensibly logical dyads for balancing shared threats from third parties.[11]

Mapping the Axes of Conflict in the Post-Arab Spring Middle East

These power relationships unfold along two crosscutting axes of competition between power blocs in the Middle East, which between them encompass almost all of the Arab world, either as participants or as battlegrounds. Their common denominator is that one camp in both is led by Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., or more precisely, by the powerful crown princes of the two countries, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) and Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), respectively. One axis of competition which was prevalent in the past in the region – between Israel and the Arab states – is notably absent, though Israel, as will be discussed below, is involved in confrontational relationships with Iran and Turkey (which was formerly a strategic ally).

The first, and older axis is that which is often referred to imprecisely as the 'Sunni-Shiʿi divide,' but is more correctly defined as the 40-year struggle by conservative states in the region - Saudi Arabia, Israel, the U.A.E., Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan and Egypt - against the "Resistance Axis" led by Iran (and including Syria, Hizballah, Hamas and Iranian-associated Iraqi-Shiʿi militias). This can be seen through both a state-based, realist-balance of power lens, as well as a sectarian-religious lens (Sunni-Shiʿi) one. Many analysts see the ostensibly sectarian nature of the rivalry as reflecting conscious securitization undertaken by the Saudi axis to mobilize and shore up their own domestic cohesion and strength, as well as that of their regional alignment. They see the use of the Shiʿi-Sunni divide - which indubitably exists and is powerful at the community level - in regional power politics as strategic and largely instrumental, and the deployment and encouragement of sectarianism as one tool among many in leaders' ideational and material arsenal.[12]

The Iranian-led camp is smaller and contains only one other state actor – Syria – but is better organized and more disciplined. The opposing camp contains disparate elements, not all of which welcome Saudi supremacy (Egypt) and not all of which consider Iran their most immediate or existential threat (Egypt,

[10] Curtis Ryan, "Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East," and Bassel Salloukh, "Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State," in *International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, POMEPS Studies 16 (2015), pp. 42-43, 47.

[11] F. Gregory Gause, III, "Ideologies, Alliances and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War," in *International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, POMEPS Studies 16 (2015), pp. 17, 19. Gause notes that "by pure balance of power logic, the region should have witnessed a Turkish-Saudi-Israeli alignment aimed at checking and rolling back Iranian power. All three states worry about Iranian power. Israel and Saudi Arabia both seem to identify Iran as their major threat. Two-thirds of that hypothetical balancing alignment, a Turkish-Saudi understanding, makes perfect sense by the sectarian logic that many believe is driving regional politics. But neither the trilateral nor the bilateral balancing alignment against Iran has emerged."

[12] See, for example: Calculli, "Sub-regions and Security …", p. 62; Augustus Richard Norton, "The Geopolitics of the Sunni-Shia Rift," in Elizabeth Monier, ed., *Regional Insecurity After the Arab Uprisings: Narratives of Security and Threat* (Houndsmills: Palgrave-Macmillan UK, 2015), pp. 131-132; and Simon Mabon and Marc Lynch, "Introduction: Sectarianism and International Relations," in *Sectarianism and International Relations*, POMEPS Studies 38, March 2020, pg. 6.

U.A.E., Jordan). The balance of success between the two camps was much affected by the Russian intervention in Syria beginning in 2015, which added significant weight in favor of the Iranian camp. It was affected as well by the ill-conceived economic war by "the Arab Quartet" (Saudi Arabia, U.A.E, Egypt and Bahrain) against Qatar (2017-2021), which strengthened Qatar's ties to Iran, and which ended in February 2021 without Doha's meeting any of its opponents' thirteen demands.

The second major axis of conflict is the intra-Sunni conflict. It began with the 2010-2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings, when conservative monarchies of the Arab world, led by the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia, united against the wave of popular uprisings. This counter-revolutionary axis conducted its first military intervention in March 2011, when forces led by Saudi Arabia helped Bahrain suppress its popular revolt. Their efforts and animosity were soon concentrated against the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which they present as the covert instigator of the turbulence afflicting the Arab world, and against the two Sunni states that supported the MB and the popular uprisings – Qatar and Turkey. The Egyptian MB, led by Mohamed Morsi, came to power in Egypt in June 2012, and received strong support from Qatar and Turkey, but were ousted a year later in a counter-revolution enjoying substantial support from Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. Subsequently, the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Qatar and Turkey, on the other, struggle for control by supporting local proxies throughout the Sunni world, in Libya, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and Sudan, as well as Palestine and Syria. The embargo on Qatar in July 2017 was both a product and an accelerant of this cleavage, and further deepened the Ankara-Doha alliance against Saudi Arabia and U.A.E., and gave it a military dimension.[13]

This intra-Sunni competition is key in understanding the dynamics of the Libyan conflict, with Turkey and Qatar until recently supporting the internationally recognized Government of National Accord, and Egypt, U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia (as well as Russia), supporting Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army. The intra-Sunni struggle also appears to be a key component in the post-revolutionary political struggle in Sudan, with the same trio of states generously supporting the Sudanese generals, helping them consolidate their power, and co-opting civilian political players; as well as crowding out Qatar and Turkey, who had latterly supported Omar al-Bashir.[14] The intra-Sunni rivalry spread from the Middle East region into the wider Muslim world: Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia, on the other, are heavily involved in a struggle for influence, waged with money and arms supplies, in Chad and other states of the Sahel, as well as in the Horn of Africa.[15] It is noteworthy that many of the conservative states in the Arab

[13] In December 2014, Ankara and Doha concluded an agreement for the forward-deployment of Turkish forces in Qatar. The April 2016 opening of Turkey's $39 million Tariq bin Ziyad base marked the beginning of Ankara's program to develop forward bases that eventually resulted in its large military presence in Libya. Turkey's base in Qatar houses some 5,000 naval, air, and special forces personnel in Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey's militarized Africa opening fuels influence wars," *al-Monitor*, August 28, 2020. It is interesting to note that when the Arab League foreign ministers in September 2020 denounced Turkey's "interference in Arab affairs," the countries which conveyed reservations about the joint statement were, alongside Qatar, Libya, Somalia, and Djibouti.

[14] Jalal Selmi, "*A* New Foreign Policy in Sudan: Status Quo or a Shift Towards the Gulf?," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), May 16, 2019. The U.A.E. in February 2020 also reportedly brokered the meeting between the head of the Sovereignty Council Gen. al-Burhan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in which they discussed normalization of bilateral ties: Saudi and Egyptian officials reportedly knew of the upcoming meeting, which had been in the works for months, but the civilian Minister of Foreign Affairs was not notified in Jean-Baptiste Gallopi, "The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan," *POMEPS Studies 40 – Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides,* June 2020.

[15] While in 2009 Ankara only had twelve embassies in Africa, the number had gone up to forty-two in 2020, and the African routes of Turkish Airlines have increased from four to 60. "To Upstage Doha, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi Shower Idriss Deby With Funds," *West Africa Newsletter*, July 24, 2019; and, "Abu Dhabi and Ankara Jockey for Position," *Africa Intelligence* 804,

world – including Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, and Morocco – are not partners to this rift, and attempt to preserve relations with both sides.

Any discussion of regional power relationships in the Middle East would be incomplete without discussing Qatar and the U.A.E. These states have an influence not commensurate with their objective relative weight. Each has been linked to a much larger and stronger regional player, but is not quite the junior partner in these relationships: they often set the ideological tone and largely determine the priorities. The U.A.E. has developed and deployed powerful expeditionary forces, including outside of the Gulf region, to promote its interests. It had, for most of the period since 2011, been the driving force behind the "counterrevolutionary coalition," though it is pursuing a more careful policy today.[16] Regarding Iran, U.A.E. has a more nuanced approach than does Saudi Arabia because of its vulnerability to Iran, both physically (it, along with Oman and Kuwait, are the closest geographically to Iran and therefore the most vulnerable), and economically. In addition, there are differences on the Iranian issue within U.A.E. itself, between Dubai, with its deep cultural and business ties to Iran, and Abu Dhabi. [17]Riyadh and Abu Dhabi also in recent months have disagreements on economic and oil issues.[18] Qatar for its part has for many years had strong relations with a broad range of Islamist movements – including Hamas and the Taliban – but also with various regional and international players (including Israel), and with the U.S., which has a massive airbase in their territory: All this has allowed it to "punch above its weight."

Gas fields discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean starting in 2010 have created not only a new potential nexus of cooperation, but also of conflict, between the countries of the littoral. An agreement on a pipeline linking Israeli and Cypriot gas fields with Greece and Italy was signed in January 2020 (though its viability is still unclear); Egypt's existing and planned gas liquefication capacities afford the state renewed importance.[19] In January 2019, the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was announced, headquartered in Cairo. The goal of the Forum – which includes Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Italy, with the U.S. as an observer (France has asked to join) – is to serve as an umbrella for cooperation and dialogue regarding the development of gas resources in the region. However, it is also a regional bloc that encompasses Turkey's rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean, and it may serve to counter Turkish efforts to disrupt members' gas exploration and production. This

July 10, 2019; Zach Vertin, *Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn, & the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea*, Brookings Doha Center, August 2019; and, Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey's militarized Africa opening fuels influence wars", *al-Monitor*, August 28, 2020.

[16] Some analysts – for instance Hazbun and Kamrava – see U.A,E. as a more plausible "Plus One" than Egypt. Hazbun in private communication with author; Kamrava, "Hierarchy and Instability in the Middle East Regional Order," *International Studies Journal* 14:4 (Spring 2018), 30-31, 35.

[17] Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, "Abu Dhabi Can't Afford To Keep Iran Out of Dubai," Lobe Log, August 8, 2019.

[18] Simeon Kerr and Anjli Raval, "OPEC Impasse Sees UAE 'Flexing Its Muscles' Against Saudi Arabia," *Financial Times*, July 4, 2021; and, Ghaida Ghantous and Marwa Rashad, "Analysis: OPEC disagreement lays bare growing UAE-Saudi economic rivalry," *Reuters*, July 6, 2021.

[19] A less ambitious, but more probable, set of pipelines seems to be in the works. In February 2021, during a visit by Egypt's energy minister to Israel, he signed an agreement connecting the Mediterranean's Leviathan gas field to Egyptian liquefied natural gas facilities through an underwater pipeline to export gas to European countries, see: Dani Zaken, "Steinitz and Egyptian Energy Minister Decide on Creating a Marine Gas Pipeline to Egypt" (Hebrew), *Globes*, February 21, 2021 and "Egypt: Netanyahu and Zohr Oilfield Bring An End to ENI-Cairo dispute," *Africa Intelligence*, March 25, 2021. The Egyptian and Greek Cypriot authorities have agreed on the principle of tying those fields to the subsea infrastructure in Egyptian waters, with a view to enabling their operators to export gas via Idku and Damietta, see: Michaël Tanchum (ed.), *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, December 2, 2020.

seems to superimpose an Eastern Mediterranean RSC, which includes non-Middle Eastern countries in Europe (Greece and Cyprus, with substantial French and Italian involvement), over that of the Middle East (especially the Levant sub-region), with substantial overlap between the two. Russia is also suspicious of the EMGF, and especially of the pipeline project, as the European partners in it are motivated by a wish to diversify their gas sources and reduce somewhat their dependence on Russian gas. The project also poses direct competition to pipelines Russia is developing through Turkey.

An interesting question in analyzing the Four Plus One is: ***who are the status quo and who the revisionist actors***? Since there isn't yet a stable status quo in the region since 2011, most of the major actors seek to preserve the status quo on some issues and to revise it on others. For instance, Turkey and Saudi Arabia (with the U.A.E.) have been adventurist powers for the past eight years. They have been projecting state power to increase their influence, change (or restore) the regional balance of power, and place themselves at the apex of the Sunni power structure in the Arab world and beyond. Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the U.A.E. have been seeking to challenge and roll-back Iranian gains, put the post-2011 "genie back in the bottle," and return to the *status quo ante*. Iran for its part can be seen as trying to cement its existing influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, "locking in" the status quo which developed between 2003 and today. One analysis presents the Iranian strategy as one of "containing" a Saudi Arabia grown much more assertive since the "Arab Spring," and especially since the rise to power King Salman and his son. It does this by thwarting and exhausting it in Syria, Yemen, and Qatar (after having pursued a policy of "counter-containment" vis-à-vis the United States since the Revolution).[20] This is counter to the common differentiation between Iran as a revisionist and Saudi Arabia as a conservative, status quo power.[21] Israel also used its significance as a balancer to Iran (seemingly 'status quo') to achieve its wider, revisionist goal of altering its long-standing pariah position in the Arab and Muslim world, through the Abraham Accord agreements of 2020 with U.A.E, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco (though the latter two are moving at a much slower pace), and a more overt alignment with Saudi Arabia.

It is worth noting that of the five, four (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt) are headed by powerful, dominant leaders who possess a well-articulated, personal view of the threats and the existing and the desired division and balance of power in the region. The political system of the fifth, Iran, formally enshrines the preeminent role of the Supreme Leader. Balances of power are not fostered solely by power politics: The personal inclinations and preferences of leaders seem to have a significant influence on their countries' policies and choice of allies and antagonists - even in the face of strong systemic or domestic pressures - and, therefore, on regional balancing.[22]

Russia's Role in the post-Arab Spring Middle East

To round out the picture of the power balance today in the Middle East, we must briefly examine Russia's strategy and policy. The Arab uprisings, and the Syrian civil war, in particular, enabled Russia to re-penetrate the region and to become, arguably, the most active external power in the Middle East. Russia is today the only party having stable relations with almost all major and non-state (the Kurds, Hamas,

[20] Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, "From détente to containment: the emergence of Iran's new Saudi strategy," *International Affairs* 97:3 (May 2021), 779-799.

[21] See, for example: Kamrava, "Multipolarity and Instability …," p. 605.

[22] Daniel L. Byman, and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25:4 (Spring 2001), 125, 135, 142.

Hizballah) actors of the region: It may be becoming the almost indispensable actor (the 'go-to' player) in managing and attempting to resolve regional crises**.** Russia sees this as one of its most significant foreign policy achievements since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The structure and interrelationships in the current system predate the 2016 elections, but the Trump administration had an important role both in buttressing its structure, especially in strengthening the Israeli and Saudi legs. It also encouraged, through its aversion to the use of American hard power in the region and the volatility of its policy-making, closer ties between U.S. allies and Russia. In this context, Russia has reached out to traditional U.S. partners like Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States to fill the vacuum left by the perceived diminished American willingness to engage in the region. Moscow sees its influence in the Middle East as an important asset in its competition with the United States, creating and expanding fissures in the U.S. strategic architecture in the Middle East. In addition, Russia's intervention in Syria to protect a client regime contrasted sharply with what is perceived in the region as American unwillingness to do the same for its allies. While these new relationships are not frictionless (especially in the Syrian theater), they do seem to stem from and buttress important shared interests and requirements for conflict management.

The "Four Plus One" Powers

i. Iran

Geopolitically, Iran is a "cusp" or "insulator" state on the margins of the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia, and figures in the history, culture and power politics of all three regions. Regarding the Middle East, it is a hegemonic, non-Arab entity situated on the margins of the Eastern Arab world, which during various historical periods, dominated major portions of Iraq and the Persian Gulf. The Islamic Revolution in 1979 was one of the most profound developments in the history of the modern Middle East and is key to understanding the power politics of the region today.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the dismantling of the Baʿth regime, contributed to a sharp expansion of Iran's regional power and influence, at the expense of the U.S. and its regional allies, which has further been encouraged by the Arab uprisings of 2011. Iran has had significant success, especially in the past decade, in creating and maintaining regional alignments of interest (in addition to its most "classical" alliances, with Syria and Hizballah). It has used shared interests in Syria to enhance its relationship with Russia; it utilized both shared interests in Syria, shared energy interests, and the post-2011 intra-Sunni divide (which raised its significance as an external balancer), to strengthen its ties with Turkey and Qatar;[23] and, of course, it has a close and robust – though not tension-free – relationship with Iraq. It has, however, been perceived for much of the past two decades in the region as the power most interested in seeking regional dominance, and therefore the target of the most comprehensive – and externally supported – regional balancing.

[23] Qatar shares the North Dome/South Pars gas field, the world's largest gas reserve, with Iran. Turkey imported until 2019 (with the imposition of U.S. sanctions on Iran) significant amounts of oil and gas – half its crude oil and 17 percent of its gas - from Iran, which is also central to its plans to become a major East-West energy transit hub.

Iran's regional strategy is driven by several key goals; Syria is crucial to all these, since the Asad regime is Iran's oldest and closest ally, making its survival a core national security interest for Tehran, and it affords short-range access to Israeli territory. First, it seeks "absolute security," the ability to deter and thwart what it views as a real and imminent threat from militarily superior and hostile external actors.[24] To address this imbalance, it adopted the concept of "network security," which combines Iranian state power assets and non-state, mostly Shi'i, proxies, in a transnational, asymmetric response to the perceived threats. It uses allies, such as Hizballah, as a forward capability to both engage and deter its enemies, with its missile program – and in the future, its nuclear program - as a second deterrent step. It also seeks a partial balance to American hostility by having a mutually beneficial relationship with Russia – reaching the level of near-military alliance in Syria since 2015 – and with China. It has recently increased economic and security cooperation with China, signing a 25-Year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement which includes plans to expand military assistance, training and intelligence-sharing, and significant infrastructure projects.[25]

Second, it strives to shape, and achieve a dominant position in, the regional balance of power. Iran views itself as the natural power of the Gulf littoral (including Iraq), owing to its size, population, and geostrategic position (with the longest shoreline), and rejects any regional order that aims to exclude it.[26] Third, it seeks to continually engage Israel – which it perceives as both as an illegitimate entity and a geostrategic antagonist – at what it sees as sub-threshold levels of conflict while creating over the longer-term a robust strategic stand-off force to deter and attack Israel.

ii. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a rich, large and populous country, but has never been one of the major military-security players of the Arab world, and it mostly preferred to take a behind the scenes role in Middle East power politics. Its oil-based financial power was not translated in past decades into effective instruments for wielding force. This was due largely to a lack of military capability (as opposed to armaments) and experience, as well as a paucity of statesmen, experts, and military leaders. Instead, power was wielded largely behind the scenes, through economic and ideological-religious means, leaving others to lead strategic campaigns that required military force. The influence was also wielded, regionally and on a global scale, through a close, and influential relationship with the United States.

The sidelining of Egypt and Iraq, the historic leading poles of the Arab world, in recent years opened a space for, or even compelled, Saudi Arabia (and the U.A.E.), to try its hand at the "heavy lifting" of operational leadership of the Arab world in its twin struggles: with a more regionally adventurous Iran, and with the social and political dynamics unleashed in the Arab Spring. This change in Riyadh's activism was dictated both by force of circumstance and by the rise of Mohammad bin Salman, who wanted to break with the traditional, conservative bounds of Saudi foreign and domestic policy. As his power and influence grew in Saudi Arabia since 2015, MbS began to pursue an activist foreign and national security policy, most significantly in Yemen, with a Saudi-Emirati intervention against the Houthis, but also in Lebanon and regarding relations with Israel.

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[24] *Iran's Playbook: Deconstructing Tehran's Regional Strategy*, The Soufan Center, May 2019.

[25] Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership," *New York Times*, March 27, 2021.

[26] *The Middle East's New Battle Lines* (Introduction Essay), European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2018.

The military intervention in Yemen in March 2015 was the second time Saudi Arabia took the lead in a major force projection beyond its borders, after its 2011 intervention in Bahrain. The economic and political campaign against Qatar (2017-2021), for its part, exemplified Saudi determination to prosecute, simultaneously with its long, cold, and proxy war with Iran, a second war against its political and ideological antagonists in the Sunni world. Thus far, this strategy has not been skillfully conducted or particularly successful. The embargo against Qatar has not changed Doha's policy or bent its will, and in fact, pushed it closer to Turkey and Iran. The attempt in November 2017 to alter Lebanon's political landscape by pressuring Prime Minister Saʿad Hariri to resign, to the extent of placing him under house arrest, was unsuccessful. The six-year-long military campaign in Yemen has failed to achieve a decisive victory over the Houthis, has drawn international condemnation, and has recently – combined with differences regarding the need to engage with Iran – has highlighted divergences between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.[27]

Implacable hostility towards Turkey and Iran has been the central driver of Saudi foreign policy since MbS's rise to prominence. However, Riyadh (as we will note below) is in recent months re-examining its adventurist policy, due its pattern of strategic failures in the region, and to concern about relations with the new American administration.

iii. Turkey

Turkey, like Iran, is a non-Arab Muslim power and "cusp state" on the margins of the Middle East, and views itself as the bridge between multiple regional systems. In the words of former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu: "Turkey is right at the center of Afro-Euro-Asia, having multidimensional characters of geopolitics. Turkey is a European country, an Asian country, a Middle Eastern country, Balkan country, Caucasian country, neighbor to Africa, Black Sea country, Caspian Sea, all these."[28]

Turkey's policy in the Middle East is being driven by a combination of balance of power, regime security, and ideological considerations. In the past decade, Turkey has shifted its focus away from Europe towards becoming an influential power in the Middle East. This was due largely to disillusionment with the possibility of accession to the European Union (EU). But it also stemmed from a desire to reclaim the leading role Turkey had in the region in the past (a vision its denigrators termed "neo-Ottomanism"),[29] expectations that it could serve as a model for emerging regimes in the wake of the Arab Uprisings, as well as from protectiveness towards likeminded players in the region, such as Qatar, Hamas, and the late MB regime in Egypt. The protracted instability in Iraq, and the many vacuums of authority created by the Arab uprisings, created significant opportunities for Turkey to play a major role in Middle East developments. However, the emergence of Kurdish autonomous entities along Turkey's southern borders, and the rise of the Islamic State, also engendered threats to its internal security and territorial integrity.

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power and the resulting change in the nature and orientation of the influential elites; the shift to a Presidential system and autocratic rule by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; and his pursuit of an ambitious, assertive, revisionist foreign policy, have combined to

[27] Yoel Guzansky and Moran Zaga, "Trouble in Paradise: Cracks are Forming in the Saudi-Emirati Relationship," *The National Interest*, August 7, 2019.
[28] "A Conversation with Ahmet Davutoglu," Council on Foreign Relations, April 14, 2010.
[29] See: Meliha Benli Altunişik, "Turkey's 'Return' to the Middle East," in Fürtig, ed., *Regional Powers in the Middle East,* p. 129.

significantly impact Turkey's relations with its former allies - the US, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel. Ankara has, in recent years, pivoted away from NATO and aligned itself more with Russia and Iran, with which it feels a "better fit" on significant regional issues (though recent developments in Syria may degrade these ties). The 2016 coup attempt made Erdoğan even more authoritarian, anti-Western, and committed to the use of Turkish hard power in the region.

Turkey is also, as noted, involved in a sub-regional balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean, seeking to prevent – including by threat of military force – Cyprus, Greece, and less directly, Egypt and Israel, from developing gas resources and conveyance infrastructure. This stems largely from the newly influential geostrategic concept of the "Blue Homeland," the regaining of Turkey's historical preeminence in its contiguous waters.[30] Turkey fears that its strategy to become the new energy hub of Europe – connecting the Black Sea, Iran, Iraq, Central Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe – is being threatened by these new gas projects. It also views the ostensibly energy-based cooperation as a security alliance aimed at balancing its self-perceived regional hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean region, and has reacted accordingly.[31]

In recent months, Ankara is reassessing its diplomatic strategy and seeking a way out of its current diplomatic isolation, especially with a new American administration and significant anti-Turkish opinion in Washington. It is also facing a severe economic crisis and needs to preserve and expand regional trade and energy opportunities (in 2019, Arab countries bought Turkish goods worth some $36 billion, accounting for a fifth of Turkey's $180 billion exports).[32] Turkey (as will be discussed in greater detail below) is therefore pursuing a policy of rapprochement with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., and, at least according to its public statements (though not actively), with Israel.

iv. Israel

Israel is the "odd man out" in the quintet of influential states. It does not have a Muslim identity, and its ability to participate openly in regional alliances and balancing was until quite recently very limited; Kappel refers to it as a "partial regional power," and a "lonely" one.[33] Israel is a "cusp state" since, while part of the Middle East RSC, its political, social, and cultural identity is much more aligned towards Europe and the United States.[34] It also has made strenuous efforts to position itself as an influential actor outside of the narrow Middle East context: former Prime Minister Netanyahu defined Israel in 2019 as a "rising global power … a major force on the global stage."[35] Israel has also formed an Eastern Mediterranean alignment with Greece and Cyprus (and regional gas cooperation encompassing Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority as well), aimed *inter alia* at Turkey.

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[30] See, for example: Ryan Gingeras, "Blue Homeland: the Heated Politics Behind Turkey's New Maritime Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2020.

[31] It has used naval forces to intimidate gas exploration vessels in Cypriot waters; close ties with the GNA in Tripoli enabled Turkey to sign (November 27, 2019) an agreement demarcating nautical boundaries and bisecting the Mediterranean. This agreement was clearly aimed at "leapfrogging" the EMGF and blocking the prospective route of the Israeli-Cypriot-Greek EastMed gas pipeline running toward Italy, see: Joshua Krasna, "Israel-Greece-Cyprus take on Turkey in the Mediterranean," *al-Monitor*, January 23, 2020.

[32] Mustafa Sonmez, "How much damage can Arab states do to Turkish economy?," *al-Monitor*, October 1, 2020.

[33] Robert Kappel, "Israel: the Partial Regional Power in the Middle East", in Fürtig (ed.), *Regional Powers in the Middle East,* pp. 146-161.

[34] Amnon Aran, "Israel's Foreign Policy Towards the PLO And its Location on the Cusp: From Coherence to Incoherence?," in Herzog and Robins, eds., *The Role, Position and Agency of Cusp States*, pp. 97-109.

[35] Boaz Bismuth and Amnon Lord, "PM: We've Turned Israel Into a Rising Global Power," *Israel Hayom*, July 18, 2019.

Israel is both economically and militarily one of the major powers of the region; it also has close relationships with the two major extra-regional powers, the United States and Russia. In addition, its strategic interests and threats are often congruent with those of other actors, and many of the other powers feel the need to engage with it in order to temper or channel, or bandwagon with, its national security policy. For the past two decades, and especially since 2011, it is the state most heavily engaged in countering both the force buildup and regional influence of Iran (especially in Lebanon and Syria); it has harnessed its global array of relations and partnerships to advance this goal. Due to its adversarial relations with Iran, as well as Turkey, Israel leans towards what it refers to as the "moderate Sunni camp," comprised of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the U.A.E., Bahrain and Morocco.

Israel is also the actor of the "Four Plus One" whose behavior with regard to regional balancing is closest to pure realism: it is driven (with the possible exception of the Palestinian issue) almost entirely by power and security considerations. The internal security and sectarian considerations discussed above regarding the Muslim powers do not come into play, because there is little penetration by external rivals to internal constituencies. It does, however, view Islamism as a threat, and intrinsically prefers authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, as it is not at all convinced that democratization of Arab regimes will lead them to a more pragmatic view of Israel. The striving for acceptance in the region is an important part of the Israeli national ethos; the regional strategic cooperation and alignments dictated by the need to balance Iran, are also seen as instrumental in habituating Israel's partners to its existence and achieving this "vision goal." The successful results of this can be seen in the 2020 Abraham Accords agreements on normalization with U.A.E., Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, and the much more overt profile of relations with Saudi Arabia in the past two years.

v. Egypt (the 'Plus One')

Egypt is, as noted, the "Plus One" to the four significant powers in the region: a secondary player until now, but one of great influence in the past in the eastern half of the Middle East, and the dominant regional player today in its western half. It is the most populous state in the Middle East, the largest military in the Arab world, and has historically been the most influential Arab state, culturally and politically. It has, however, been absorbed since 2011 in internal stabilization, including crushing the MB and internal dissent, as well as in restoring governability through an obstinate and bloody war with Islamic State affiliates in the Sinai.[36]

However, President ʿAbd al-Fattah al- Sisi succeeded in pushing through constitutional amendments, allowing him to extend his presidency until 2030. This tidying of the domestic arena enables him to pursue greater external prominence. Regional re-engagement has, in any case, been made imperative by circumstances that touch directly on Egyptian interests and national security and compel Egypt to bestir itself and step back into its historic role, at least among its near neighbors. These include destabilizing developments on its western border, in Libya, as well as its eastern border, in Gaza, which not only posed a threat, but also an opportunity to play a major mediating role. The increased significance of Eastern Mediterranean gas has positioned Egypt as the lynchpin of the emerging gas infrastructure and economy,

[36] It can be plausibly argued that this distancing from centrality in the Arab system is even older: after it signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1979, almost all members of the Arab League broke diplomatic ties with Cairo until 1987, and it was suspended from the Arab League until 1989. However, even after its acceptance back into the Arab fold, it played a much diminished role in Arab affairs.

and of the political and strategic structures created around it. In addition, the year 2019 saw political upheaval in the second (Sudan) and the third (Algeria) largest Arab states, which again posed challenges to Egyptian interests. Egypt's concentration on its immediate surroundings is probably also a reflection of its limited resources and domestic economic challenges, leading it to choose to "throw its weight" where doing so is most important and can be most influential.[37]

A major strategic concern for Cairo in the past two years has been Ethiopia's decision in 2020 to begin filling its Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Upper Nile, without agreeing with Egypt and Sudan to rules about water storage and the dam's operation. This in the Egyptian view poses a critical long-term threat of seasonal water shortages downstream, which would severely impact Egyptian agriculture and food security. As a result, Egypt has made significant efforts to create a united Arab front against the Ethiopian actions, including an extraordinary Arab League summit of foreign ministers on the issue in Qatar in June, (which was also a sign of Egyptian-Qatari rapprochement).[38] There has been significantly increased diplomatic and military cooperation, joint exercises and deployments, with Sudan, as well as an active Egyptian effort in the Horn of Africa to encircle Ethiopia with an anti-Ethiopian coalition.[39] There is a parallel effort to create to create a pro-Egyptian bloc in the Nile River Basin: in addition to Sudan, Egypt signed military, security or intelligence agreements with Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi in 2021.[40]

In parallel, Egypt is making efforts to build a new/old axis with Iraq and Jordan, the rationale for which is both economic and strategic. The three states see potential for significant trade, energy, and infrastructure collaboration, due to geographic continuity. They also seek to cooperate to allow them to regain influence and support outside their sub-regions, diminish the Saudi- Emirati near-hegemony in Arab affairs, and regain what they see as their rightful place in the inter-Arab arena. However, in the end

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[37] Nael M. Shama, "Egypt's Middle Power Aspirations Under Sisi" in Saouli, ed., *Unfulfilled Aspirations …,* pp. 108-109. One sign of Egypt's increasing concern with, and desire to project power into, its "near abroad" is the opening of new naval bases in Western Egypt (the July 3 Base, named for the date of the toppling of the Morsi administration, the opening of which in July 2021 was attended by Mohamad bin Zayed) and on the Red Sea Coast (the Berenice or Ras Banas base, near the border with Sudan, was inaugurated in January 2020), see: Ahmed Eleiba, "Egypt's 3 July Naval Base: A Quantum Leap," *Ahram Online*, Jul 7, 2021.

[38] Yoel Guzansky and Ofir Winter, "Does Qatar's Return to the Arab World Run through Egypt?," *INSS Insight* No. 1493, June 30, 2021.

[39] Muhammed Magdy, "Egypt signs military deal with Kenya amid escalating tensions with Ethiopia," *al-Monitor*, June 1, 2021 and Alaa Omran, "Ethiopia angered by Egypt's alleged plan to establish military base in Somaliland," *al-Monitor*, August 6, 2020.

[40] "Sisi Tries Containment Tactics Against Abiy's Renaissance Dam," *Africa Intelligence*, June 17, 2021. Ethiopian relations with Turkey are improving, probably as a counterpoint: In addition to a growing trade relationship between the two countries, Ethiopia is the leading destination for Turkey's Africa investments, receiving $2.5 billion of Turkey's almost $7 billion of investments across the continent, see: Michaël Tanchum, "Turkey Advances in Africa against Franco-Emirati-Egyptian Entente," *The Turkey Analyst*, August 25, 2020. A consultant for the Turkish Foreign Ministry's Africa policy made the calculus quite clear: "After Sisi came to power, we have been looking to balance Egypt's influence. We do it in Libya and also in East Africa … When we look at how we can counterbalance Egypt, which actors are there? There is Ethiopia. Ethiopia has been excluded from the 1929 and 1969 agreements about the Nile but recently it has emerged as an influential new actor in the region. Therefore, us developing our relations with Ethiopia is a direct answer to Egypt. There are two dimensions. We want to develop our relations with Ethiopia, and we want to develop our relations with an Ethiopia that is stronger against Egypt. A strong Ethiopia against Egypt is something that Turkey wants," see: "Trimming Turkey's wings: Ankara and Cairo fight for influence in Africa and East Med," *Mada Masr*, August 25, 2020.

all three countries are poor (despite Iraq's oil resources) and dependent for economic largesse on more wealthy partners.[41]

Dyadic relationships and Balancing Behavior among the "Four Plus One"

The complex relations between the "Four Plus One" states, ranging from being adversaries, friends, or potential allies, are shaped by multiple factors: sectarianism, internal politics, geopolitics, along with the perception of internal and external threats that can undermine domestic stability and regime security. The forthcoming sections will delve into the specific bilateral relations between the powers, and describe the patterns of their balancing behaviors.

Table 3: Relationships Between the Main Regional and External Powers

	Iran	Turkey	Israel	Saudi Arabia	Egypt	US	Russia
Iran		🔷	🔴	🔴	🟡	🔴	🔷
Turkey	🔷		⚫	🔴	🔴	🟢?	🔷
Israel	🔴	⚫		🔷	🔷	🟢	🔷
Saudi Arabia	🔴	🔴	🔷		🟢	🟢	🟡
Egypt	🟡	🔴	🔷	🟢		🟢	🔷
US	🔴	🟢(?)	🟢	🟢	🟢		⚫
Russia	🔷	🔷	🔷	🟡	🔷	⚫	

Red- enemy
Green – ally
Blue – alliance of interests/positive relationship
Black – negative relationship
Orange – neutral relationship

i. Iran-Saudi Arabia

There has always been an element of tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a non-Arab power on the Gulf, seeking to extend its hegemony and influence into its littoral. The Islamic Revolution added an ideological layer to the geopolitical rivalry. Saudi Arabia was appalled by the new Iran's militant anti-monarchist ideology and its revolutionary Shi'i character. Riyadh also feared the geopolitical implications of the revolution, since one of the three largest countries in the Middle East was now an anti-status quo, revisionist state, and thus disrupted regional equilibrium.[42] Iran, for its part, views Saudi Arabia as a corrupt, atavistic ideological and religious rival in the Muslim world; as an American proxy; and as one of the lynchpins of an international alignment to contain it and prevent it achieving its geopolitical goals. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia has shown an interest in or willingness to engage in

[41] Joshua Krasna, "Egypt-Jordan-Iraq: Another Middle East Axis in the Making?," *Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security Policy Paper*, September 22, 2020.

[42] Gregory Gause notes that Saudi foreign policy is driven by many factors, sectarianism being just one, and most cases not the major one. Saudi policy is at least, and arguably more, anti-Iranian than it is anti-Shi'i; Riyadh is more worried about Tehran's geopolitical reach into Iraq, the Levant, the smaller Gulf monarchies and Yemen, than its ability to stir up opposition among Saudi Shi'a, see: F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia and Sectarianism in Middle East International Relations," in *Sectarianism and International Relations*, POMEPS Studies 38, March 2020, pp. 14-15.

direct inter-state conflict, which gives Iran an advantage, as it has superior non-conventional military forces.[43]

Saudi Arabia pursued a policy of balancing Iranian power and threat through alliance with stronger military powers: Iraq (from 1979-1989), Turkey (until their split after 2012), and the United States; since 2011, it has ramped up its cooperation with Israel for this purpose. It also utilized the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for this purpose, though this became become largely irrelevant in recent years, due to the lack of interest of Kuwait, Oman, Dubai and especially Qatar, in conflict with Iran. In addition, rivalry with other potential allies against Iran, like Turkey and Qatar, limited Saudi Arabia's ideological appeal and ability to form a "Sunni bloc" to effectively constrain the pro-Iranian (not exclusively Shiʿi) bloc.

The Saudi-Iranian conflict was accelerated by the exposures of the Iranian nuclear program beginning in 2002, which stoked Saudi fears that a nuclear capability would greatly enhance Iran's ability to assert hegemony in the Gulf and dominance in the region (and also encouraged cooperation with Israel vis-à-vis American political elites). This coincided with the American toppling of the Saddam regime, and the opening of a power vacuum in Iraq, which came under Shiʿi hegemony. Iraq was eliminated from its thirty-year position as a balance to Iranian military power and as a geographic buffer between Iran and the conservative Gulf states, a development which brought Iranian (and Shiʿi) influence much closer to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. The Saudi antipathy towards Iran received an additional boost in 2011 when it seemed the Iranians and their Shiʿi allies might be poised to exploit new currents unleashed by the Arab uprisings. The Saudis and their allies pursued a delegitimization and securitization of the Arab uprisings, by imposing on them a sometimes ill-fitting sectarian framework of Shiʿi-Sunni struggle, and by seeking to promote a conflation of the popular-democratic threat, with that of Iranian expansionism (in Syria and especially in Bahrain and Yemen).[44]

However, Saudi Arabia can moderate its attitude towards Tehran, if national interest so dictates. Saudi détente with Iran has been apparent since 2019, when Riyadh grew concerned about the lack of concrete U.S. response to the downing of a U.S. drone by Iran in the Persian Gulf in June and attacks on Aramco facilities in September. In November 2019, indirect negotiations were reported to be occurring through the mediation of Pakistan and Iraq. More recently, Iraqi President Barham Salih confirmed that Baghdad has hosted more than one round of talks between the two.[45] As the Biden administration assumed office and it became clear that Washington intended to rapidly restart nuclear deal negotiations, Saudi Arabia began to pursue a policy that would satisfy the new administration. The Biden administration seemed to be ready to pursue a much more critical policy towards Saudi Arabia. Independent Saudi outreach to Iran served to support Washington and as a hedge against the United States' potentially ignoring Saudi concerns in talks with Tehran.[46]

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[43] Christopher Phillips, "Rivalry Amid Systemic Change: Iranian and Saudi Competition in the post-American Middle East," in *Sectarianism and International Relations*, POMEPS Studies 38, March 2020, p. 8.
[44] Salloukh, "Overlapping Contests …," pp. 47-51.
[45] "Iraqi president confirms Baghdad hosted Saudi-Iranian talks 'more than once'," *al-Monitor*, May 5, 2021.
[46] Hussein Ibish, "Saudi Arabia's New Dialogue With Iran was Long in the Making," May 4, 2021.

One of the key issues for Saudi Arabia in its engagement with Iran—apart from the American consideration—is Riyadh's interest in disengaging from the civil war in Yemen, without being seen as having been beaten. As the main external support of the Houthis, Tehran is the key to any sort of conflict settlement. Saudi Arabia is also interested in ensuring maritime security in the Gulf; the two countries may also discuss modalities of Iran's possible return to the oil export market. This may also be seen as a result of the success of the Iranian strategy to "contain" Saudi Arabia and prevent success in the latter's more activist policies of the past six years.[47]

ii. Iran-Israel

The most significant, and most straightforward, adversarial relationship among the powers which comprise the "Four Plus One," is that between Iran and Israel. Israel, while no longer facing conventional military threats on its borders and possessing sufficient military power to deter and, if necessary, defeat possible state rivals, views a nuclear Iran as a potentially existential threat, and Iran as harboring implacable ideological/religious hostility to Israel's existence. Thus, the lion's share of Israel's military, covert, and foreign policy consist of unstinting efforts to expose and neutralize Iran's nuclear activities, as well as to contain and roll back Iranian influence and power, especially in Lebanon and Syria (through its "Campaign between the Wars"). Iran is the primary threat against which Israel acts to create balancing coalitions and alignments.

In the pre-revolutionary period, the two countries were not adversaries, and in fact engaged in cooperation in balancing radical Arab powers, as part of the Israeli "periphery strategy."[48] While bilateral relations declined precipitously after the Islamic Revolution, both countries viewed Iraq as the major strategic threat, and Israel reportedly assisted Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.[49] With the eclipse of the Iraqi threat starting in 1991, both countries began to define the other as their primary threat. This increased as Iran and its proxies began to wage a terrorist war against Israeli and Jewish targets; as details of the Iranian nuclear program began to emerge in the early 2000s and Israel began to wage clandestine and diplomatic/information campaigns against it; and as Hizballah – greatly enhanced by Iranian assistance, especially in the missile and rocket field – became defined, especially after 2006, as Israel's primary immediate military threat and opponent.

The Arab Spring further intensified tensions between Iran and Israel. If Iran and Israel had been in indirect and clandestine confrontation, since Iran's active engagement in the Syrian conflict, the two countries are engaged directly. This is due to Israeli fears that Iran is transforming Syria (and Yemen) into a platform for operations against Israel, and seeking to create a "land bridge" through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, to enable shifting personnel and large quantities of rockets and missiles close to Israel's borders, in continuation of its strategy since 2000. In response, Israel acts directly but also seeks to balance Iran through forming its own coalition aiming at rolling back its influence, developing cooperative, interest-based relations with Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Bahrain, Azerbaijan, and other Muslim states.

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[47] Ahmadian and Mohseni, pp. 798-799.

[48] Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Matar, 2015), pp. 27-29.

[49] Leslie H. Gelb, "Iran Said to Get Large-Scale Arms from Israel, Soviet and Europeans," *New York Times,* March 8, 1982; Samuel Segev, *the Iranian Triangle: The Untold Story of Israel's Role in the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

iii. Iran-Turkey

Turkey (the Ottoman Empire) and Iran (the Safavid Empire) have a long history of territorial, political, and cultural competition. Ankara is traditionally wary of Tehran's ambitions in its immediate neighborhood. However, the changing dynamics in the Middle East have transformed these former rivals, at least temporarily, into allies of interest. This has been facilitated by the significant internal transformation of Turkey, from a secular, Western-oriented power to an Islamist, Middle East-centered one.

Turkey-Iran rapprochement has had multiple drivers. Both are 'cusp states,' both feel that the US-led strategic architecture in the region did not adequately reflect their power and interests, and therefore are 'revisionist' actors regarding the regional balance. Through the 'Astana process,' they cooperated on issues of interest, especially in Syria, with the revisionist global power present in the region, Russia. All three see the United States as trying to contain them and thwart their pursuit of greater regional power and influence. Both Ankara and Tehran are more concerned with countering and balancing Saudi Arabia and its key Gulf allies–who desire to roll-back the regional changes of the past decade, which resulted in gains for both of them – than with their disagreements with each other. Turkey believes that the activist policy towards Iran by the Saudi-aligned Arab states, Israel and the U.S. forms part of their broader desire to suppress political Islam; they perceive an attempt at 'double containment' of Iran and Turkey.[50] Iran is therefore seen as a bastion against broader trends, which could ultimately harm Turkey and its clients as well. The two powers also share a clear interest in containing Kurdish nationalism and prevent Kurdish moves towards independence.

Shared concerns and overlapping interests of Turkey and Iran should not, however, be regarded as a long-term and unconditional alliance, as their long-term visions of the preferred regional orders differ. Turkish-Iranian relations are a compound of competition and cooperation, and the alignment is more one of interests than of deep affinities.[51] Turkey has no interest in being encircled by Iranian clients: their long-term interests in Syria, in Iraq, and in Central Asia are not, therefore, the same. In the past year, there has been friction between Turkey and Iran, regarding Nagorno-Karabakh (where they backed different sides), provocative statements by Erdogan regarding Azeris in Iran, arrests in Turkey regarding Iranian intelligence activity against dissidents on Turkish soil, and differences regarding Syria. [52]

iv. Saudi Arabia-Israel

Perhaps the most intriguing dyad is that of Saudi Arabia and Israel. The security and covert political relationship between Israel and Riyadh (and the U.A.E.), existed discreetly for years and has advanced significantly over the past few years, including in its public profile. This is due to the two major U.S. allies' doubts regarding U.S. intentions and capabilities. This has led to a shared need to balance, contain, and, if possible, rollback Iran's nuclear program and increasingly intensive and successful regional activity, largely utilizing their own soft and hard resources.

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[50] Galip Dalay, "Turkey in the Middle East's New Battle Lines," Brookings, May 20, 2018; and, Galip Dalay, "Why is Turkey betting on Russia?," July 15, 2019.

[51] Hüseyin Işıksal, *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters After the Arab Spring* (Springer International Publishing, 2018), 13-31.

[52] Galip Dalay, "Turkish-Iranian Relations Are Set to Become More Turbulent," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 9, 2021; and, Amberin Zaman, "Turkey-Iran tensions spike over Azerbaijan," *al-Monitor*, December 14, 2020.

Saudi Arabia is trying to oppose and balance against two major ideological adversaries at once – Iran and the opposing Sunni pole under the leadership of Turkey – and therefore is limited in its opportunities for coalition partners. It will not combine with Iran to balance Turkey, or, easily, with Erdogan's Turkey to balance Iran and its Shi'i allies. This has encouraged it to reach a relatively high level of strategic cooperation with Israel, both diplomatically (especially vis-à-vis the United States regarding Iran) and in the intelligence field. A key accelerant to the ties was the Trump administration, which encouraged them in service of its aim to establish an alternative regional alliance to enable a retrenchment of the American military presence in the region; it also made substantial efforts to bring Riyadh into the Abraham Accords framework.[53]

Israel's current relationship with Saudi Arabia - not to mention U.A.E. and Bahrain, with whom it has opened diplomatic relations, as well as Oman and Qatar - is the culmination of long-standing efforts to create covert, semi-overt, and ultimately, normalized relations with Arab and Muslim states. Israel has eroded the Arab taboo against overtly including it in coalitions, and now openly acts as an outside partner to the "moderate Sunni camp." In November 2020, former Prime Minister Netanyahu "unofficially" visited Saudi Arabia and met with MbS[54]; this was by no means the first meeting by Israeli officials with Saudi royals, or even the first visit by senior Israelis to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia undoubtedly gave the "green light" to Bahrain, and perhaps to Sudan, to fully normalize relations with Israel (while refraining from doing so itself). Riyadh's ability to take the final stage in its relations with Israel and open diplomatic relations in the near term is bounded by domestic and Arab public opinion.

At the same time, Israel does not seem to have illusions about the will or the capability of Saudi Arabia to significantly engage with Iran militarily. The 'second prong' of Gulf state strategy – balancing and alliance-building against popular movements, the MB, Qatar, and Turkey – is less important for Israel (except regarding Hamas).

v. Saudi Arabia-Turkey

The antipathy and rivalry between Riyadh and Ankara are of relatively recent vintage and stems both from the rise of AKP and Erdogan, and their role during and after the Arab uprisings. The two states were important components of the pre-2011America-centric security regime, in the region. However, the metamorphosis of Turkey into a Sunni Islamist republic posed an ideological threat to Saudi Arabia, as it provided a revisionist model of a 'devout state' which was not dependent on quietist acquiescence to monarchical rule. Turkey is also a populous, working-class, non-rentier state, whose regime has linked itself with the downtrodden and marginalized, and directs class-based appeals to the 'Muslim street' against Gulf elites.

There is, therefore, a competition between the two states, over political and ideological-religious leadership of the Sunni world, and between the two perceptions – republican and monarchical – of Islamic political power. This was evident in 2011 when Turkey both served as a model for Islamists, especially MB groups, striving to bring down authoritarian regimes and reach political power, and was seen by these regimes as actively encouraging and supporting such groups. The overthrow of the Morsi government in 2013 with

[53] Jacob Magid, "Kushner: Saudi normalization 'inevitable'; TV: Another deal may come within days," *Times of Israel*, December 10, 2020.

[54] Dan Williams, "Netanyahu met Saudi crown prince, Pompeo in Saudi Arabia: Israeli minister," *Reuters*, November 23, 2020.

Saudi and Emirati connivance, and Turkey's becoming the bolt-hole and center for the MB, led to open antagonism between the two countries (as well as the U.A.E.). The enmity has deepened further with the Qatar crisis starting in 2017 - when Turkey stood by its ally - and the Khashoggi affair. This has limited the ability and willingness of the two sides to cooperate in balancing Iran (or Israel, for that matter) – as strict balance of power logic and simplistic sectarian understandings of regional politic might indicate – since each sees in the other as much, or even more, of a strategic and ideological threat and rival. [55] As noted, Ankara has in recent months been making overtures towards Saudi Arabia (as well as the U.A.E. and Egypt), not unlike those Riyadh is making towards Iran, in an attempt to de-escalate and manage tensions, as well as to correct errors of strategic overreach. On April 28, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's spokesman said, "We will seek ways to repair the relationship with a more positive agenda with Saudi Arabia."[56] He also noted that Turkey respected how the Saudi judiciary had handled the Khashoggi affair, with eight individuals sentenced to prison. The Turkish foreign minister visited Riyadh on May 10 and met with his Saudi counterpart, two days after a phone call between Erdogan and King Salman bin ʿAbdulaziz.

Apart from the wider Turkish policy of reducing conflict, there is a significant economic driver regarding Saudi Arabia. Exports of Turkish goods to Saudi Arabia, worth over three billion dollars in 2020, dropped significantly in the past year, reaching a year-on-year decline of over 90 percent in the first months of 2021. The decline came from an officially encouraged commuter boycott, based on the Turkish exposures and reactions regarding the Khashoggi case.[57]

However, Saudi Arabia is more reserved: It is the pursued, rather than the pursuer. Détente with Iran is a higher priority for Riyadh. The Saudis—like the Egyptians—may see Turkey as being more vulnerable and motivated to improve relations than they are, and therefore feel less obliged to make concessions or high-level statements to improve the atmosphere.

vi. Turkey-Israel

As noted above, for many years, Israel's relationship with Turkey was the best it had with a Muslim-majority state. Turkey was the first Muslim state to recognize Israel in 1949. The two U.S. allies had close strategic, intelligence, and political ties, especially regarding radical threats in the region. The economic and political partnership between the countries intensified in the 1990s, with a formal strategic cooperation agreement signed in 1996: the two militaries carried out significant military and military-industrial cooperation, as well as joint exercises. Trade and tourism between the two states also burgeoned.[58]

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[55] Gause, "Ideologies, Alliances and Underbalancing …", pp. 17, 19. The tension between Saudi Arabia (like U.A.E.) and Turkey has found expression in Saudi efforts to bolster the anti-Turkish alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean, specifically through deepened relations with Greece. In March 2021, the Royal Saudi Air Force sent six F-15s to Crete for joint training—the first such visit ever. Soon after, the chairman of Saudi Arabia's joint chiefs of staff visited Greece, another first. In April, the foreign and defense ministers of Greece flew to Riyadh to sign a military agreement, including the provision of a U.S.-made Patriot missile defense system to Saudi Arabia, see: Aristotle Tziampris, "Greece is Reshaping the Eastern Mediterranean Region," *World Politics Review*, June 3, 2021.

[56] "Turkish, Egyptian talks may bring peace to Libya: Kalın," *Daily Sabah*, April 26, 2021.

[57] Cem Cetinguc, "Turkey's exports to Saudi Arabia plummet in April", May 6, 2021.

[58] Kilic Bugra Kanat, "Turkish-Israeli Reset: Business as Usual?," *Middle East Policy* 20: 2 (Summer 2013).

The rise to power of the AKP, and of Erdoğan, created a rift between the two powers, as Ankara became more vocally supportive of the Palestinian cause and Hamas and closer to Iran. Relations between the two powers were still reasonable, however, and the Turkish government even served as a go-between in indirect peace negotiations between Israeli and Syrian delegations in Istanbul in -20072008. The Gaza conflict of 2008-2009 and the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 (in which nine Turks were killed by Israeli forces boarding a Turkish ship sailing to break the blockade on Gaza), accelerated the decline in relations. Despite Israel's apology in 2013 and payment of compensation for the incident and the reinstatement of diplomatic relations in 2016, the relationship has continued to be poor. Turkey recalled its ambassador to Israel and expelled the Israeli ambassador and consul general in Istanbul in May 2018, following the U.S. embassy move to Jerusalem and violence along the Gaza border.[59]

The tension in bilateral relations has led to wider balancing policies. Israel has, as noted, developed significant military, political and strategic cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, as well as wide gas cooperation with these countries and with Egypt. These have a significant anti-Turkish rationale, though Israel was conspicuously absent from the signatories of a joint statement by Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, France and the United Arab Emirates (May 11, 2020) sharply criticizing Turkey's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean.[60] At the same time, Turkey has been balancing Israel (or at least developing a means of pressure on it) through its relations with Hamas, which have been improving as those with Israel have been deteriorating; The relationship with Hamas, which has an ideological-religious component, is also part of Erdoğan's bid to lead the Muslim world by taking the mantle of defender of the Palestinians, whom his Sunni geostrategic rivals are accused of abandoning.[61] On Syria, however, Turkey has stayed largely silent regarding Israeli strikes against Syrian regime, Iranian and proxy targets, which may be congruent with Turkish interests.

Turkey has over the past year displayed ostensible readiness to ease tensions with Israel, especially after both countries supported and assisted Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There have been intelligence contacts over the past few years, reportedly with the participation of Hakan Fidan, head of the Turkish intelligence service.[62] The Azerbaijani government reportedly offered its assistance to mediate between its two allies.[63] In December 2020, Erdoğan announced that he wished to see relations improve.[64] Turkey may be trying to use the Israel "card" to improve its political position in Washington. It may also be trying to mend ties with Egypt and Israel on order to force a wedge in what it sees as the anti-Turkish alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean and counter the territorial claims of Cyprus and Greece.

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[59] It is interesting to note, however, that the significant bilateral trade (over 5.5 billion dollars in 2018, with Turkish exports to Israel double imports) and involvement by Turkish infrastructure companies in Israel, has been little affected by the ups and downs of the political relationship, see: Amberin Zaman, "Will Rancor or Realism Prevail in Turkish-Israeli Ties?," *al-Monitor*, August 29, 2019.

[60] Fehim Tastekin, "Is Turkey on Moderation Path in its Foreign Policy?," *al-Monitor*, May 27, 2020.

[61] Katerina Dalacoura, "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Power Projection and Post-Ideological Politics," *International Affairs* 97: 4 (2021), 1137.

[62] "Israel's Mossad chief meets head of Turkish intelligence," *Hürriyet*, June 12, 2013; Dean Shmuel Elmas and Ariel Kahana, "Erdogan confidant sends Israel another message of reconciliation," *Yisrael Hayom*, June 12, 2020; Amberin Zaman, "Turkey opens secret channel to fix ties with Israel," *al-Monitor*, November 30, 2020.

[63] Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Azerbaijan seeks to mediate between Turkey and Israel," *Axios*, December 23, 2020; Fuad Shahbazov, "Why is Azerbaijan trying to rekindle Israeli-Turkish ties?," *The New Arab*, February 4, 2021.

[64] "Erdogan says Turkey would like better ties with Israel, Palestinian policy still 'red line'," *Reuters*, December 25, 2020. The Israeli Energy Minister was invited to participate in a diplomatic forum in Turkey in June; the invitation was cancelled on May 11 in the wake of the Palestinian-Israeli violence.

However, little real progress has occurred, and Israel has been extremely skeptical of the Turkish approaches. Jerusalem, like Cairo, continues to view Erdoğan's Turkey as a strategic challenge in the Eastern Mediterranean and will take great care not to harm its deepened strategic cooperation with Greece and Cyprus (not to mention the UAE and Saudi Arabia). In addition, it conditions improved relations on the end of Turkish support of Hamas and of attacks on Israel by the Turkish leadership.

vii. Egypt-Saudi Arabia (and Egypt-Iran)

As noted above, the place of Egypt (and Iraq) as the prime force in Arab politics has been filled in recent years by Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. These states supported the mass movement and the military intervention against the Morsi government, which enabled President Sisi's rise to power. After that, they provided tens of billions in cash, petrol, and investment to stabilize his regime. This made Egypt dependent to a large extent on Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and theoretically beholden to them in its regional policy and strategy. After the counter-revolution of 2013, the Egyptian regime made significant and unusual gestures towards the Saudi Crown Prince, including the return of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi sovereignty in 2016 (a move which triggered a wave of anti-Saudi criticism and protest among the Egyptian public).

The leaderships of both powers (and U.A.E.) share an innate conservatism and a strong antagonism to democratic movements, Islamism, and especially the MB, and Turkey (and until recently, Qatar), which are seen as the enablers of anti-status quo forces in the region. Egypt participated in the embargo against Qatar and cooperates with Saudi Arabia and U.A.E. in balancing and trying to roll back Turkish influence in Libya, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa. With the second phase of popular uprisings, in Algeria and Sudan, the powers were together back in the situation they faced in 2011-2013, when popular movements brought down authoritarian regimes and threatened to create new popular political arrangements, as well as increase the political power of Islamists.

Regarding Iran, Sisi is not fully committed to his backers' activist agenda. Cairo is not fond of the Islamic Republic and is troubled by its subversive regional activities, a position encouraged by the fact that Morsi sought to improve bilateral relations during his short tenure, and even visited Iran in August 2012. But far more severe, closer and imminent in its view, are the threats of Salafi Sunni terrorism, of further regime changes in the region, and of possible diffusion of unrest from Gaza into Egypt. The MB, with support from Ankara and Doha, is seen by the regime as an existential threat; Iran is not.[65] Egypt, therefore, demurred from involvement in the Yemeni conflict and does not play a significant role in the anti-Iran coalition.

There is also the matter of national pride: Egypt accepts its current secondary position in the Arab world, but not always graciously; it bristles at being treated as a junior partner, and views its partners as parvenus. A noteworthy example of Saudi-Egyptian tensions, apart from the aforementioned protests regarding the transfer of the islands to Saudi Arabia, was in October 2016, when Egypt voted in favor of a Russian-sponsored UN Security Council resolution supporting the Syrian government. The Saudi delegate to the

[65] Mohamed Maher, "Understanding Egypt's Limited Involvement in the Campaign Against Iran," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), March 21, 2019.

Council accused Cairo of "breaking with [the] Arab consensus" and Riyadh subsequently suspended several oil shipments to Egypt. In an angry statement, Sisi responded that Egypt "bows only to God."[66] Regarding recent Turkish overtures to Cairo and Saudi Arabia, the two countries are well-coordinated. The Saudis—like the Egyptians—may see Turkey as being more motivated to improve relations than they are, and therefore feel less obliged to make concessions or high-level statements to improve the atmosphere. Some reports indicate that Riyadh has "delegated the Turkish file" to Cairo, with whom it is working closely and will not progress on bilateral relations unless Egypt does so.[67]

viii. Egypt-Israel

Egypt and Israel have had a peace agreement, respected by both sides, since 1979. The Sisi regime has significantly expanded relations with Israel, especially in the security, military, and intelligence fields. The Egyptian regime tightly controls the traffic of material and people in and out of the Gaza Strip, carrying out military engineering operations against the Hamas smuggling tunnels in the Rafah area. It also serves as a crucial interlocutor between Israel and Hamas – mediating and facilitating ceasefires in the series of military conflicts and carrying messages between the two sides. In addition, the two countries have shared interests, and close military and intelligence cooperation regarding the war against "Wilayat Sinai," the Islamic State-affiliate active in Sinai, including coordinating on Israel's air and drone strikes in Egyptian territory against the jihadists.[68] Israel has, over the years, permitted the Egyptians to increase their forces in Sinai significantly beyond those allowed under the military appendixes of the peace treaty, in order to better prosecute their war in Sinai, and control the entrances to the Gaza Strip.[69]

While the two countries cooperate against terrorist threats and regarding conflict management and containment of Hamas in Gaza, they do not pursue balancing behavior vis-a-vis third powers. While each of them does cooperate with Saudi Arabia, they are each balancing with Riyadh against a different major power (Egypt against the MB, democratizing forces, and Turkey, and Israel against Iran), without the relationships melding into a trilateral axis.

The development of gas resources in each country's territorial waters has thus far been a force for cooperation between the two. The two countries have a joint interest in developing gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, which creates a strong impetus for cooperation with Cyprus and Greece, and places them in potential conflict with Turkey. They have signed an agreement on the export of 85 billion cubic meters of Israeli gas to Egypt over the next fifteen years (at an estimated value of 19.5 billion dollars), for domestic use and re-export[70], and have as noted above agreed on linking Israel's gas platforms to Egyptian pipelines and liquefication infrastructure.

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[66] Yasser El-Shimy, "Egypt: Wildcard," in *The Middle East's New Battle Lines*, European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2018.

[67] Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey's good words not worth much to Saudi Arabia," *al-Monitor*, May 5, 2021.

[68] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, With Cairo's O.K," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2018; and, "For First Time, Egyptian President Confirms Israel Helping Fight Sinai Jihadists," *Times of Israel*, January 4, 2019.

[69] "Egyptian Army in Sinai Peninsula Doubles in a Year, With Israel's Blessing," *Times of Israel*, March 1, 2018; and, "Egyptian forces to enter Sinai," *Israel Defense* [in Hebrew], August 14, 2011.

[70] Ahmed Kotb, "Gas From Israel," *AhramOnline*, January 11, 2020.

ix. Egypt-Turkey

The relationship between Turkey and Egypt, two of the largest and militarily strongest of the "Four Plus One," has been at a historic low since Morsi's ousting in 2013 and Turkey's transformation into a safe haven for the Muslim Brotherhood (with which the AKP feels ideological kindred). The interests of the two powers have clashed across the region, including in Libya, Sudan, and Syria.[71] Egypt opposed the 2019-2020 Turkish incursion into Syria and orchestrated the Arab League's condemnation of the move.[72] In the Eastern Mediterranean, they have diverged over the gas issue and the creation of Egyptian-Greek-Cypriot-Israeli gas cooperation.[73] In May 2020, Egypt announced an international alliance that includes Greece, Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates and France, which will focus on confronting the Turkish "illegal" oil exploration in the territorial waters of Cyprus. The alliance also condemned Turkey's escalated violations of Greek airspace, as well as the Turkish-GNA memorandum of understanding on the delineation of maritime borders in the Mediterranean, and Turkish military assistance to the GNA (including provision of Syrian combatants).[74]

In 2020, there was real potential for direct military conflict between Egypt and Turkey in Libya, after massive intervention by Turkish air, drone and naval forces and by Turkish-affiliated Syrian mercenaries turned the tide of fighting against Haftar's LNA and led to the possibility of the GNA's achieving control over the whole country. President Sisi warned in June that an attempt by Turkish-backed forces to attack the strategic city of Sirte or operate east of it would cross a "red line" and trigger a direct Egyptian military intervention into the conflict; Egypt's parliament voted to permit the deployment of forces abroad in July. This tension, and the standoff it engendered, contributed significantly to the breakthrough in the Libyan crisis: a ceasefire being signed in October 2020, Egypt sending a delegation to meet with the GNA leadership in Tripoli in December 2020, and the creation of a UN-backed transitional government in March 2021.

Turkey, as noted, has recently made a significant change in the tone of its policy towards its Sunni rivals. In March 2021, it signaled willingness to "open a new chapter" with Egypt. Turkey-based Egyptian opposition media outlets were ordered to suspend attacks on the Egyptian government and President Sisi. The most significant development so far was an early May meeting of the two states' deputy foreign ministers in Cairo, the first official talks between the two states since 2013; contacts previously had been handled by the countries' intelligence services.

Ankara may be trying to divide its Eastern Mediterranean adversaries and pry Cairo away from Greece and Cyprus. It has proposed a maritime boundary agreement with Egypt, probably to counter a similar agreement that Egypt signed last year with Greece; that agreement, in turn, was in reaction to Turkey's own maritime border agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord in November 2019, which ignored parts of Greece's exclusive economic zone. The recent Turkish offer was met with disinterest on the Egyptian side. Turkey, in dire economic straits, also wishes to ensure continued trade with Egypt, which has continued to be extensive and hit record highs in 2018-19 despite political tensions.[75]

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[71] Oren Kessler,"Egypt Picks Sides in the Syrian War: How Sisi Learned to Love Assad," *Foreign Affairs,* February 12, 2017.
[72] Ahmed Gomaa, "How far will Egypt go to defend Syria?," *al-Monitor*, October 17, 2019.
[73] Samy Magdy, "Egypt, Cyprus, Greece Condemn Gas Exploration by Turkey," *Associated Press*, October 8, 2019.
[74] George Mikhail, "Egypt Announces International Anti-Turkey Alliance," *al-Monitor*, May 31, 2020.
[75] Hagar Hosny, "Egyptian-Turkish trade agreement comes under fire," *al-Monitor*, February 8, 2021.

One key irritant in the bilateral relationship, Libya, seems to be declining in importance. However, Egypt has demanded that Turkey withdraw its forces and Syrian mercenaries from Libya as a precondition for improving relations. The other main issue for Egypt is Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and specifically the presence in Turkey of thousands of Egyptian members who took refuge there after the 2013 coup. Egypt is not expected to compromise on either issue, as it sees the Turks as having the greater interest in rapprochement.

As noted above, Egypt is also making efforts to counter Turkish efforts to strengthen its presence in Africa: Sisi is reported to have discussed these in a phone call with Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani in December 2020. There is also reported cooperation with Israel and Sudan to counter Turkish influence in Somalia.[76]

Conclusions, and Some Observations on Possible Futures

The major characteristics of the Middle East's regional security complex over the past decade have been:

- The declining significance of the U.S. as a systemic hegemon and balancer;
- The existence of two parallel axes in the regional balance of power, with the intra-Sunni rift, perhaps equaling the Sunni-Shi'i division;
- Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. assuming an unaccustomed leading operational role in the Arab world, in the (temporary?) absence of Egypt and Iraq;
- The emergence of Turkey as a major player in the Middle East;
- The repositioning of Israel as a legitimate partner in balancing and alliances;
- Slightly different dynamics in the Western and Eastern Middle East, with Egypt playing a significant role in its immediate neighborhood;
- The intractability of the major crises in the region due to the overlay of regional power rivalry and balancing over local dynamics;
- The development of an Eastern Mediterranean strategic alignment based on newly discovered gas resources, which creates a new balancing dynamic with Turkey, and creates overlap between the European and Middle Eastern regional security complexes;
- Russia as the most active and significant external player on the ground, with ties to every player.

External powers will continue to play a significant role in the structure and operation of the balancing system, which came into being largely based on the fear of American absence and the reality of strong Russian presence. Russia has enjoyed a streak of successes in the Middle East since 2013, at low cost: a major and visible setback, for instance, a large number of casualties in Syria, could raise the domestic cost of its Middle East policy and reduce its prominence and role.

[76] "Cairo looks to counter Ankara in Sahel," *Intelligence Online*, December 21, 2020; Khalid Hassan, "Egypt seeks alliance with Sudan, Israel to counter Turkish influence in Somalia," *al-Monitor*, November 19, 2020.

China has not yet begun playing a politico-military role in the region (from which it in 2018 got over forty percent of its oil) commensurate with its great power status. Its strategy has until now been to deepen economic linkages while preserving neutrality and not getting embroiled in the region's myriad and protracted political or military quagmires.[77] However, continued competition with the U.S., and especially fears for its lines of energy supply might lead China to increase its penetration of the region in other spheres, and take a more active "hard power" role in shaping or bolstering the regional balance.

How stable is the existing structure, and how lasting are the characteristics outlined in this paper? Many of the alignments we have seen over the past decade are based on specific situations and conjunctions of interests, which could change in the future. Many dyads encompassing Turkey, for instance, could change, since few of its relationships - with the possible exception of that with Qatar - are based on deep ideational components. Ankara's alignment of interests with Iran could change, especially as Turkey deepens its adversarial relationship with the Asad regime; its relationship with Israel could improve, as has appeared possible several times in the past decade. The Saudi-Israeli relationship could shrivel as political leaderships shift, or the domestic and inter-Arab political price for Riyadh rises. Since, as noted, most of the powers are characterized by narrow, even one-person, decision-making systems at the top of the national security systems, such changes can be rapid and surprising. The change in government in Israel may, for instance, ease Turkey's path to improving relations with Israel, which the active and vocal personal dislike between Netanyahu and Erdoğan may have precluded.

However, some dyads – such as Israel and Iran, or Saudi Arabia and Iran – will continue to be confrontational and frosty in the foreseeable future. 'Underbalancing' – the exclusion of some seemingly logical dyads, for ideational/regime security reasons – will also continue to characterize the system.

As noted, there are in recent months some initial signs that tensions in some of the dyads may be easing. This is due to overextension and failure of adventurist policies on the part of Turkey and Saudi Arabia (as well as U.A.E.); economic pressures, including those stemming from the coronavirus crisis; and the need to minimize challenges and tensions in their relationships with the new American administration. This does not mean that a real or lasting change in fundamental regional dynamics is in view. There is little liking or real trust, and much personal and elite enmity, in all of the relevant dyads: Turkey-Egypt, Turkey-Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia-Iran. In addition, the remaining parties may be less inclined to compromise on their interests; for instance, it is doubtful whether Cairo has an interest in significantly changing its Eastern Mediterranean energy strategy to benefit Ankara. The desire for détente seems for now to be driven more by a desire for a "time-out" than a decisive embrace of cooperation- or norm-based regional diplomacy and crisis management, and/or a significant change of national goals and strategies.

Regarding the very composition of the "Four Plus One," it, too, is vulnerable to change in the mid-term. Saudi Arabia – or more correctly, the Saudi-Emirati duopoly – can reasonably be seen as a placeholder, holding leadership of the Arab state system while the major Arab powers are supine. If the 'Plus One,' Egypt, actually becomes a gas-producing and exporting power, and the Eastern Mediterranean gas condominium continues to flesh itself out, Cairo may continue to regain its confidence and stature. Smaller Arab states unhappy with Saudi overbearingness will perhaps then join Cairo to balance Riyadh and return

[77] Gordon Houlden and Noureddin M. Zaamout, *A New Great Power Engages with the Middle East: China's Middle East Balancing Approach*, University of Alberta China Institute, January 2019, p. 4.

it to its previous, non-activist role. Turkey could become more and more involved in its own internal and economic issues, disengage – if not from Syria, then from its out-of-theatre adventures, for instance in Libya and the Horn - and become a new 'Plus One.' The acquisition of a nuclear weapons capabilities by Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Turkey, or Iran's attainment of a nuclear weapons, could drastically change the nature of balancing among the "Four Plus One."