

GLOBAL DISRUPTIONS AND THE MAKING OF A NEW MIDDLE EAST

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Towards a New Middle East amidst Global Disruptions and Regional Transitions: An Introduction

Talip Küçükcan

This volume originated from debates and discussions held at the TRT World Forums in Istanbul to which the contributors to the book participated giving papers and presentations. Since its inauguration in 2017, TRT World Forum has brought together academics, journalists, politicians, think-tankers and members of civil society to address social, political, economic and security challenges on regional and global levels. This volume includes updated papers as well as articles commissioned by the Editor.

Since the end of the Cold War, the World has been going through radical transformations and international politics is increasingly being marked by the emergence of new powers, conflicts and challenges against the established World Order. While populism is on the rise on a global scale, multilateralism is increasingly being questioned and ongoing conflicts, wars, political and economic competition among global powers and regional actors continue cause disruptions and inflict pain and misery all around the world. This edited volume addresses some of the new challenges and complexities of global transformations in recent decades in the Middle East and offers fresh perspectives not only with regards to the dynamics of ongoing and emerging challenges but also on how to best grapple with their disruptive implications. Taking the legacy of the last hundred years and its implications for today into consideration, contributors to this volume argue that a new Middle East is in the making, drawing on the origins and evolutions of long-running disputes as well as emerging issues in security, energy, foreign policy and economy.

The Middle East as a complex region is studied from different angles. This book adds a new dimension to the present literature by unpacking the legacy of foreign powers and changing dynamics leading to the

emergence of a new Middle East with rising regional powers shaking the post-colonial status quo in the region. Şükrü Hanioglu's contribution in Chapter One supports this observation and illustrates the historical trajectory of how the century-old status quo has been falling apart and a new status quo produced "as a result of a bitter struggle among global actors, nationalisms, and sectarianisms". He argues that the old status quo has been imposed upon peoples of the region and warns against the dangers of "pushing for maximalist nationalist and sectarian agendas" and the risks of relying on deals with non-regional powers. He concludes that reaching an understanding that respects all parties and reflects the will of the people of the region will create the strong and sustainable bonds necessary to avoid repeating the catastrophe that occurred a century ago. In Chapter Two, William Hale takes stock of the century-old Sykes-Picot Agreement, which not only created artificial borders but also a bitter legacy of inter-state and internal conflicts that have lasted to this day. In his article, Hale addresses three major questions as to the reasons behind the rise of the Sykes-Picot agreement, its impact on the formation of the status quo and state structure that has largely been maintained until today, and the extent to which current regional conflicts can be accounted for with reference to the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Hale argues that the Sykes-Picot agreement reinforced existing divisions within the Arab world, by setting up the institutions of separate nation-states, which have proved remarkably durable despite many crises and conflicts. Looking back at the legacy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, this chapter concludes that the ongoing conflicts in the region derive from a complex mix of historical, cultural, and economic factors. Regional actors in this context are said to all too often act as the allies and proxies of global superpowers who have vested interests in the region.

Richard Falk charts the trajectory and evolution of Israeli-Palestinian relations marked by never-ending tensions, dilemmas and conflicts in the context of retreating globalisation with a special emphasis on US policy,

which he characterises as regressive. In Chapter Three, Falk argues that the retreat from globalisation generates risks and opportunities on the global and regional level and presents the character of these threats and opportunities. He underlines the rise of ultra-nationalist leadership as a central feature of the new world order, leading to “withdrawal of support from cooperative responses to global problem-solving, relying instead on transactional bargains between governments as shaped by geopolitical disparities rather than by deference to considerations of international law, diplomatic compromise, and global justice”. Falk illustrates the contradictions of US policy on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which greenlights the expansion of Israeli settlements in occupied lands in clear violation of international law and significantly increases grievances of the Palestinian people. He concludes that while present realities seem to favour Israeli ambitions, a genuine unification of Palestinian leadership and the shift toward democratic transition can be regarded as factors that would strengthen the Palestinian position in the future.

The transformation of foreign policies of the prominent actors in the Middle East in the face of regional and global shifts is also addressed in this volume. In this context, Jana Jabbour’s article in Chapter Four examines the perception of Turkey’s “new” foreign policy options and decisions in Europe to which Turkey claims to be an integral part and therefore its leadership regards full membership in the European Union as a strategic objective. Jabbour first, looks at general orientations, the major paradigmatic grounds and several distinct elements of Turkish foreign policy that have emerged under the AK Party that makes Europe uncomfortable in its relations with Turkey. She then successfully explores the relative neglect of Europe in appreciating changing dynamics and explains “the deeply-rooted political and sociological factors that account for Europe’s unease with Turkey and its difficulties to make sense of Ankara’s diplomacy”. She concludes that there are strong grounds for renewed cooperation such as counterterrorism,

migration, energy, the Syrian Civil War and economic investments as Europe acknowledges that Turkey's quest for status and power is a legitimate one but needs to be honest with Turkey as far as the future of full membership is concerned.

In Chapter Five, Faruk Kaymakcı provides a Turkish perspective on troubled Turkey- European Union (EU) relations which have gone through a challenging period despite recently increased high-level contacts and argues that the future shape of the relations will depend on the policy decisions of the EU rather than Turkey. He focuses on the benefits of mutual trust, good working relations and full membership, which is seen as the backbone of relations. Drawing on the impacts of the upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa, Kaymakcı argues that the EU should play a broader role in close cooperation and solidarity with Turkey if the EU's strategic vision is to be a global actor rather than being locked into intra-EU affairs. Echoing Jabbour in Chapter Four, Kaymakcı believes that trade, investment, energy security, defence, the fight against terrorism, irregular migration, radicalisation, cybercrime, climate change is some of the critical issues that are mutually beneficial grounds on which strengthened relations can be built that would reinvigorate accession negotiations, visa liberalisation and updating customs union agreement as immediate expectations of Turkey from the EU.

In Chapter Six, Kaan Kutlu Ataç enquires into the logic and character of Turkey's power politics regarding military involvement in the Syrian Civil War. He claims that the realist perspective of geopolitical theory is sufficient to understand the geographic system in which Turkey is situated, and thereon predicting developments in the said realm. Drawing on geopolitical theorist Richard Hartshorne, Ataç also thinks that global politics are shaped by centrifugal and centripetal forces asserting that centrifugal forces naturally create separating impact and centripetal forces increases unity of the political objectives of Turkish senior decision-makers. Drawing on the analysis of Turkey's cross

border operations in Syria, namely the Euphrates Shield and the Olive Branch operations, Ataç concludes that despite the negative impacts of the centrifugal and centripetal forces created within its borders, Turkey has proven its ability to protect its national interests by engaging in pre-emptive political manoeuvres and military operations to achieve at least relative stability in Syria from Ankara's perspective.

Energy is one of the critical issues in the context of Middle Eastern politics and a source of economic and strategic rivalry, competition, conflict and cooperation. As a result of global political-economic transitions and fundamental shifts in power, global energy dynamics are changing, leading to the emergence of a new world energy and geopolitical order. Turkey aspires to become an energy hub in terms of energy transportation projects and security. In Chapter Seven, Mehmet Ögütçü's focuses on Turkey's aspirations to become an indispensable energy transportation hub as a country that is lacking in oil and gas resources. He considers new opportunities and constraints in Turkey's energy economy and geopolitics, as well as the gas market dynamics in the EU and in the energy-rich region around Turkey. Ögütçü believes that Turkey, the EU and the US need to work closer on energy issues and concludes that "Turkey is not content only to be a simple "bridge" over which energy flows. It aspires to become a regional "hub" that can serve its strategic and commercial interests. Certainly, the country has the potential to become a major regional "hub" in the true sense of the word, for energy flows in the next decade or so if smarter policies can be possibly put in place to both ensure its energy security and serve as a reliable partner for producing and consuming nations, investors and operators."

In Chapter Eight, Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney looks at the ups and downs in Turkish-Russian relations in recent years and the energy dimension of cooperation that produced mutual economic and strategic benefits for both countries. Ateşoğlu Güney's focus is the TurkStream pipeline project in particular which she sees it is a win-win initiative for both

Turkey and Russia after weighing strategic opportunities and risks embedded in the implementation of this project through which the first gas was pumped on January 1, 2020. She illustrates how the energy dynamics of Europe will be affected following the launch of TurkStream and how Turkey and Russia will emerge as winners in the long run. She challenges the claims that Ankara has become more dependent on Russia after the initiation of TurkStream and argues that in the last decade Turkey has succeeded in changing the weight of mutual dependency in its favour through engaging in more recent large scale energy and defence projects such as the Akkuyu nuclear reactor, purchasing S-400 missile system expanding grounds of cooperation between Turkey and Russia. In her conclusion, she argues that Turco-Russian relations in the economic and trade arenas will be considerably enhanced despite continuing geopolitical competition between the two in Syria and elsewhere.

The Arab Spring, which started in 2010 in Tunisia and spread to North Africa and a large part of the Middle East, has caused deeply felt disruptions and transitions whose social, political and economic effects are still being observed in these regions. In Chapter Nine, Mahjoob Zweiri and Muyassar H. Suleiman take stock of the impact of Arab Spring on GCC Countries after a decade of tumultuous events that led to change of governments, civil wars, human displacement, re-alignments as well as partial emergence of relatively participatory governance. Zweiri and Suleiman argue that most of the interventions within the context of the Arab uprisings led to the creation of fragile states and created new threats or “risks” to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The most important threat according to the authors, was the role of non-state actors, refugees, and infringements on sovereignty. They offer a broader understanding of GCC policies within the context of the Arab uprisings by focusing on the failure of the state’s structure and its centralisation, which led to the emergence of new security, political, economic, and social challenges for states in the region.

The Arab Spring has shaken the status quo and left a lasting legacy in different forms in the MENA region with reverberations that continue to be felt strongly. While the masses demanded social and political transformation pushing governments to introduce significant changes in some countries, the revolutionary wave has also led to regime changes in others. In Chapter Ten, Maha Azzam illustrates the impact of the Arab Spring on Egypt by examining the forces of revolution and counter-revolution. She believes that “despite the success of the coup against Egypt’s nascent democracy, the regime’s subsequent policies carry the seeds of the military’s ultimate demise after almost seventy years of political dominance. However, the level of damage and stagnation that is a result of decades of dictatorship and of particularly the last seven years since the coup of rapidly increasing failure, threatens state and society and not one political system.” Azzam argues that repression as a means of control and containment can succeed only in the short term and will become an obstacle to any form of progress at any level. She projects that in “such a political climate Egypt remains in a stalemate, unable to move forward or to defend its interest while fissures within the state between the ruling elite and the rest of society continue to widen so that some view the situation as leaving a zero-sum equation as an inevitable outcome.”

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not only between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. The impact of this decades-long conflict is felt across the Muslim world beyond the Arab states and the Middle East. Global powers such as the US are also engaged in the conflict mostly on the Israeli side and World Jewry are also closely interested in its development. The recent US move of its embassy to Jerusalem / al-Quds has been criticized by many Muslim countries and the US-led Abrahamic Accord has been viewed with scepticism, except the Gulf region. In Chapter Eleven, Azzam Tamimi looks at the original causes of the conflict in Palestine with a view of showing that the roots of the conflict are not found in religious differences and disputes, but rather

in the legacy of European colonial powers. He challenges the widely held narrative, which often portrays the century-old conflict as a mere territorial dispute, ethnic and even religious in nature. Instead of a culturalist and religious reading of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is based on a binary opposition between Islam/Muslims and Judaism/Jews, he proposes to look into a historically informed political approach that will explain the roots of the problem.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the One Belt One Road Project, is planned to involve more than sixty countries with an estimated budget of 1.2 – 1.3 trillion dollars. Many Middle Eastern countries will engage in this New Silk Road project, with potentially massive impacts on regional economies, security and governance. Its weaknesses might be a source of disruption whereas its strengths might lead to transformations in the region. In Chapter Twelve, Sadık Günay provides a balanced account of China's BRI in a world of global disruption, transition, multipolarity and global political competition. Taking the current global environment and conventional mechanisms of control over international channels of energy, logistics and trade, he stresses that multifaceted competition between China and the US began to determine the major contours of policy preferences by other major actors. Günay argues that analyses in Western academia regarding the potential impact of the BRI were biased because of ideological prejudices. However, he argues that there are serious issues with regard to cost management, financial prudence, legal-institutional frameworks and the risk of debt traps for countries involved in BRI. Günay concludes that major actors, including the US, Japan and Russia, have some serious reservations pertaining to the growing influence of China on regional and global contexts.

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