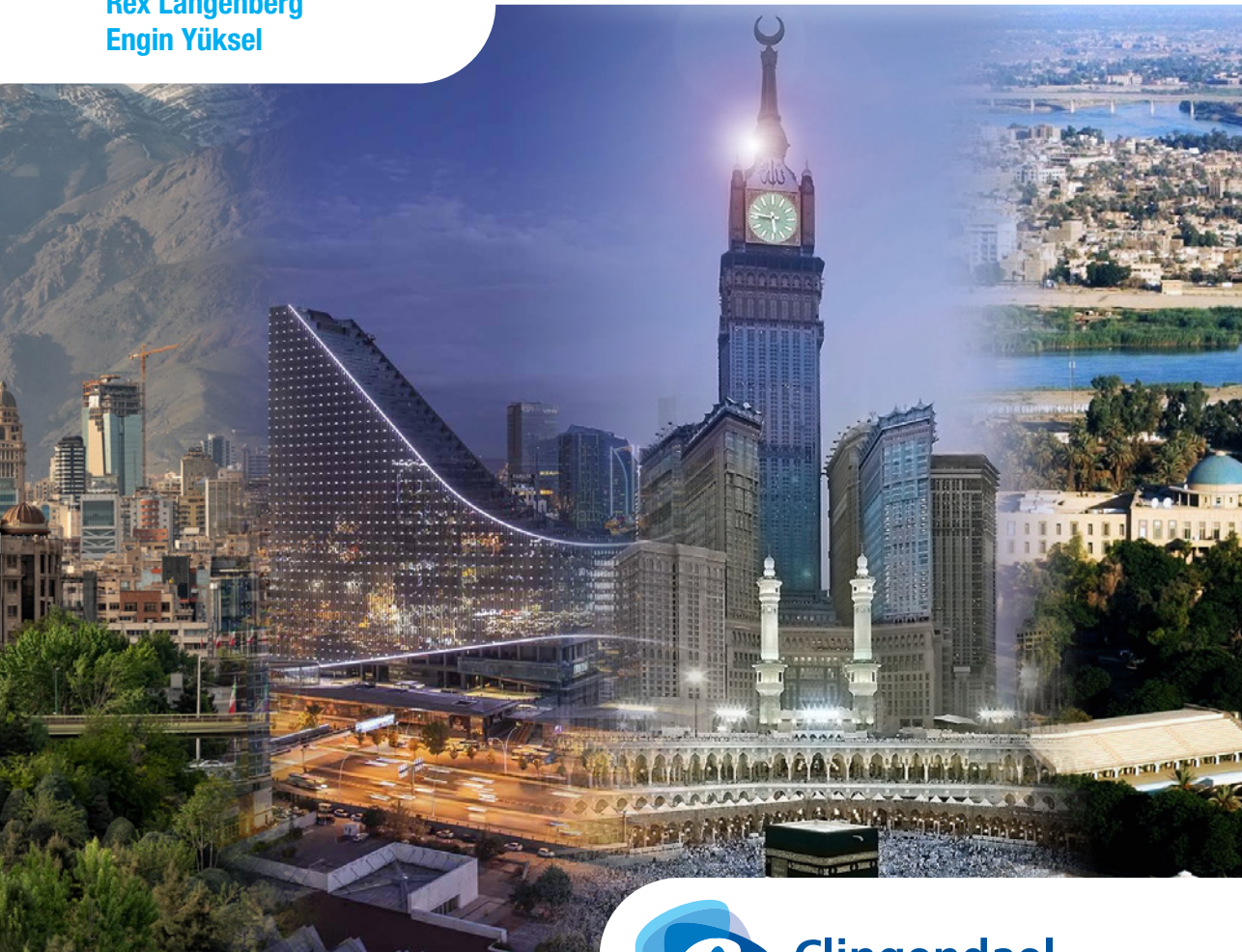


# Cassandra calling?

Development, governance and  
conflict trends in the Middle East

Erwin van Veen  
Nancy Ezzeddine  
Rex Langenberg  
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CRU report



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# Summary

Populations across much of the Middle East face mounting socioeconomic problems in terms of poverty, inequality, corruption and unemployment while, in the main, the political orders that govern their lives have limited capabilities and/or show little intent to address these problems in a fundamental manner. Neither large-scale socioeconomic improvements nor deep political reforms are on the cards as authoritarianism continues to re-entrench across the region, including its heavyweights Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Tense geopolitical relations worsen socioeconomic problems and sustain authoritarian political orders through securitisation of discourse and policies, as well as by distracting from domestic governance shortcomings. US interventions as extra-regional power have proven to be uniquely uncondusive to regional stability over the past two decades. Despite recent talks between Ankara, Tehran, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, crises and competition will likely remain the norm in the near term since none of the underlying drivers of the region's core conflicts have yet been resolved. This suggests more misery lies in store for many within the Middle East while greater negative externalities will affect those that live around the region.

Although the vicious cycle between socio-economic deterioration, authoritarian political order and geopolitical competition can only be restructured from within the region and over the long term via a gradual re-ordering of social and power relations, external actors like the EU or the Netherlands can give such processes positive nudges. These include, for example, greater efforts to contain conflict in the short term by stopping arms sales and increasing humanitarian aid; engaging in 'soft power' regional peacebuilding efforts in OSCE or EBRD-style; and improving as well as standardizing diplomatic toolkits to better protect protestors-at-risk on the basis of universally agreed human rights.

# 1 Introduction

Over the past decades, the Middle East<sup>1</sup> has undergone substantial turmoil, crisis and conflict. Among other headline incidents, one can point to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, several Gaza wars, the financial crisis of 2008/09, the 2011 Arab uprisings, further protests in 2019/20, the Syrian war, the meteoric rise and fall of Islamic State (IS) (2014–2017), the nuclear stand-off between Iran and the US, as well as the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 across the region. From an analytical perspective, it is however important to go beyond such crises and examine the Middle East as a region facing three interlocking problems that influence its prospects for a less conflicted and more stable future: a poor socioeconomic situation, the persistence of authoritarian political orders and intense geopolitical competition.

The region's socioeconomic situation is somewhat of a paradox. At first glance, it features relatively high levels of human development and low levels of poverty, but also high levels of inequality, unemployment and corruption. Moreover, there seems to be a stark regional divide in the level of development between the rentier states on the southern littoral of the Persian Gulf and the rest of the region. On top of this, the political order across the region remains solidly authoritarian, not least because Tehran, Ankara and Riyadh have all become significantly more so over the past few years. Whether such regimes are capable – or even inclined – to fundamentally address the socioeconomic challenges their populations face, remains a moot point. Finally, any authoritarian mortgaging of an already dire socioeconomic future is facilitated by intense regional geopolitical competition between Iranian-, Saudi- and Turkish-linked blocs that confront each other based on their ruling elites' anxieties about survival, loss of power and status. Such perceptions and attitudes lead to securitisation and externalisation, which makes it trickier to address domestic governance problems. Anxious authoritarianism defends itself at home as well as abroad, and usually with negative consequences for human development.

This report outlines prospects for instability and conflict in the Middle East based on an analysis of selected trends in the evolution of socioeconomic development, political order(s) and regional competition, including connections between them, for the period

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1 In this report, the Middle East is considered to be 15 countries: Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Yemen. While it is common to combine the Arab countries of North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt – sometimes Sudan) with the countries of the Middle East into the well-known acronym 'MENA', this makes little sense from a conflict perspective as these regions feature different security dynamics.

of ca. 2010 until late 2021.<sup>2</sup> It does so with the intention of offering directions for EU and Dutch foreign policy on the understanding that regional problems cannot be resolved through the sum of country-specific approaches. Instead, countries across the Middle East face *similar* problems (e.g. rising poverty rates), *shared* problems (e.g. extremism, water scarcity or even the nuclear stand-off) and *joint* problems (e.g. Kurdish drives for greater autonomy) that must be addressed in a corresponding manner.<sup>3</sup>

### Box 1 Putting trend analysis into a population perspective(s)

The total population of the Middle East as defined in this report (see footnote 1) amounts to c. 346 million inhabitants. Roughly 50 per cent (168 million) lives in Iran and Turkey. About 70 per cent lives in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey (243 million). In each of these four countries, 80–90 per cent of the population lives in urban areas. Referring to the slightly different area of West Asia, the UN Population Division projects that its population will start plateauing around 2050, mostly due to a steadily decreasing birth rate that goes back to the 1950s. While about 50 per cent of the area's population is currently below the age of 30, this expansionary population pyramid will give way to a more stationary one by 2050.

Sources: World Bank [population data](#); UN Population Division <https://population.un.org/wup/Country-Profiles/>; <https://population.un.org/wpp/Graphs/DemographicProfiles/Line/922> (all accessed 10 September 2021).

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- 2 We would like to thank Jalel Harchaoui (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime) and Valeria Talbot (Italian Institute for International Political Studies – ISPI) for their helpful review of the report. Its contents naturally remain the authors' responsibility.
  - 3 Similar problems are problems that occur in multiple countries at the same time in different forms and of different magnitude. They can largely be addressed domestically but benefit from the exchange of knowledge and good practice (e.g. reducing poverty). Shared problems occur in multiple countries at the same time in similar form but with varying degrees of intensity. Essentially negative spillovers, they require the source country(ies) to internalise the cost of the problem, which requires incentives (e.g. agreeing a new nuclear deal). Joint problems occur in multiple countries at the same time in largely comparable form and magnitude. They can be resolved only through collaboration (e.g. Kurdish drives for greater autonomy in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran).



## 2 Socioeconomic development

Considering the financial-economic crisis in Lebanon, the state of war-ravaged Syria, the impact of sanctions on Iran and the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, it is surprising to see many Middle Eastern countries score relatively well on the Human Development Index (HDI) between 1990 and 2019. The HDI is a focused measure of development that is based on life expectancy at birth, levels of education and standard of living.<sup>4</sup> Eight of the region's 15 countries rank in the 'very high human development' range. In addition to all the Gulf countries, this also includes Turkey and Israel. With Iran ranking in the 'high human development' range, together these nine countries are home to the vast majority of the region's inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

### Low levels of extreme poverty – at first sight

According to the World Bank, the region also featured relatively low levels of extreme poverty between 1990 and 2017 if one applies the international poverty line of US\$1.90 per day (notwithstanding increases in 2015 and 2018).<sup>6</sup> In this period, regional poverty rates hovered between 0 and 8 per cent of the population in many countries, with Yemen being the negative outlier. It should be noted that the impact of Covid-19, US sanctions on Iran and Syria and the full extent of Lebanon's crisis are not reflected in these figures. For example, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA) has since estimated that over half of Lebanon's population can be classified as poor or extremely poor today, with the country's middle class shrinking rapidly.<sup>7</sup> The roughly 11 million IDPs and 7 million refugees across the region form another group of poor and vulnerable individuals (slightly over 5 per cent of the entire population of the Middle East as defined in Box 1).<sup>8</sup>

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4 See: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdi-what-it-is>; For a critique: [https://www.econlib.org/archives/2009/05/against\\_the\\_hum.html](https://www.econlib.org/archives/2009/05/against_the_hum.html) (both accessed 1 October 2021).

5 See: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI> (accessed 1 October 2021).

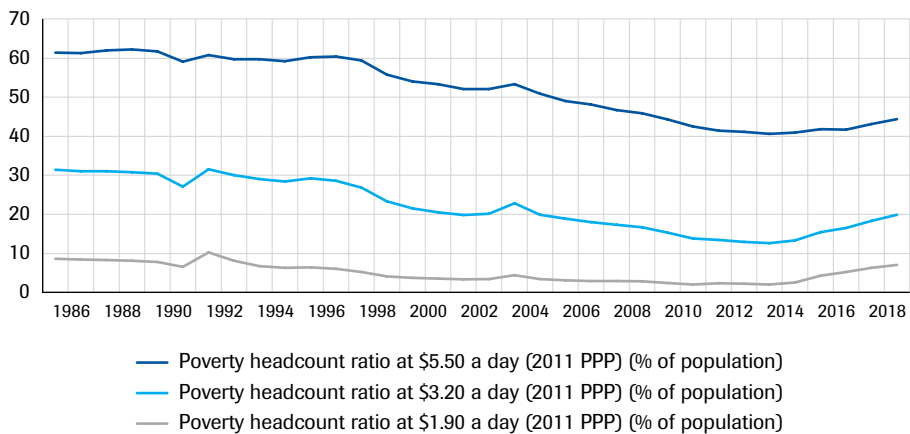
6 World Bank, *Reversals of fortune: Poverty and shared prosperity 2020*, Washington: World Bank, 2021, p. 32; World Bank, *Middle East and North Africa, Poverty and Equity, 2020*.

7 UN ESCWA, *Poverty in Lebanon: Solidarity is vital to address the impact of multiple overlapping shocks*, Beirut: UN ESCWA, 2020, [online](#).

8 Most are concentrated in Syria (6.7 million IDPs), Yemen (4 million IDPs), Turkey (3.6 million refugees), Iraq (1.2 million IDPs), Lebanon (870,000 refugees), Iran (800,000 refugees) and Jordan (700,000 refugees). The number of IDPs across the Middle East increased from c. 1.5 million in 2010 to 13.5 million in 2015 and then decreased to c. 11 million in 2019. The number of refugees increased from c. 2.8 million (2010) to 5.8 million (2015) and 6.7 million (2019). See: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=jHfg3S> (accessed 18 October 2021).

Such cursory examination of well-known and often-used international data might lead one to think that the region has proven to be rather resilient in the face of crises and conflict and that authoritarian governance systems managed to generate substantial levels of basic development. Yet, such observations are typically based on aggregate data that disguise large intra-country differences (in case of national-level data), large differences between countries (in case of regional-level data), data of questionable quality or data that prioritise quantity over quality (e.g. years of education). To begin with poverty, the key risk to social stability is less the number of people currently classified as poor, but rather the high level of vulnerability to shocks that can tip populations into sudden poverty. Figure 1 illustrates the issue. If one takes US\$5.50 per day as the poverty benchmark rather than US\$1.90 per day (the international poverty line), the percentage of the region's population that is poor explodes from c. 7 per cent to c. 44 per cent (2018). This finding is much closer to UN ESCWA's observation that about two-thirds of the Middle East's total population – around 250 million people – are poor or vulnerable when considering deprivation beyond income (including health, education and living standards).<sup>9</sup> According to the Arab Barometer, between 70 and 85 per cent of families across the region cannot afford to cover basic monthly needs or can only do so by borrowing or via aid.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1 Poverty in the MENA region at different thresholds**



Source: World Bank, World Bank database, [online](#) (data retrieved on 15 September 2021).

9 Abu-Ismaïl, K. and Al-Kiswani B., *Multidimensional poverty in the poorest parts of MENA: Agenda for action*, Economic Reform Forum, 2018, [online](#); See also: Abu-Ismaïl, K., *Note on poverty and conflict in Arab states*, Beirut: UN ESCWA, 2020, [online](#).

10 Arab Barometer IV Survey, 2021, see: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/covid-19-survey/> (accessed 18 October 2021).

As Figure 1 shows, this situation has been the norm over past decades, i.e. large parts of the population across the Middle East have lived under precarious conditions for a long time. Further shocks that will jolt this state of affairs are already in the making. They include the tail-end of the Covid-19 pandemic, the unresolved war in Syria, the state of the Lebanese and Turkish economies, the gradual revival of IS, the unresolved Palestinian question and the uncertainty of a return to the nuclear deal by the US and Iran.

Moreover, poverty is becoming entrenched. Recent studies show that a poor family today is likely to remain poor for several generations due to the inability of the economies in the region to generate new (good-quality) jobs in sufficient numbers.<sup>11</sup> Low labour productivity remains a particular and persistent challenge due to the dominance of capital-intensive oil sectors and overstuffed public sectors.<sup>12</sup> Low levels of educational attainment also play a role in entrenching poverty. International test scores show that about half of all public school pupils do not master basic reading, writing and mathematics.<sup>13</sup> This helps explain why nearly 60 per cent of the available labour force works in the informal sector.<sup>14</sup> Such findings also challenge the HDI by suggesting that the quantity of education – which the HDI measures – cannot be considered as a proxy of the quality of education.

## Inequality and the Middle East as synonyms

The socioeconomic situation worsens when one considers inequality across the region as a relative measure of wellbeing next to poverty as the absolute measure of wellbeing. Both the World Bank and UN ESCWA note that (too) little is known of the issue and that by some measures the Middle East appears to show low levels of inequality. Nevertheless, on the basis of 2019 national income distribution data, the World Inequality Database (WID) finds that the top 10 per cent of the Middle East population gets 51–83 per cent of national income while the bottom 50 per cent gets between 3 and 14 per cent.<sup>15</sup> Figure 2 shows similar results that point to the Middle East as one

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11 Khouri, R., *Poverty, inequality, and the structural threat to the Arab region*, Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for International Affairs, 2019.

12 For an overview of labor productivity trends in the Middle East: <https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/charts/labour-productivity-in-selected-mena-countries-1970-2015> (accessed 24 January 2022).

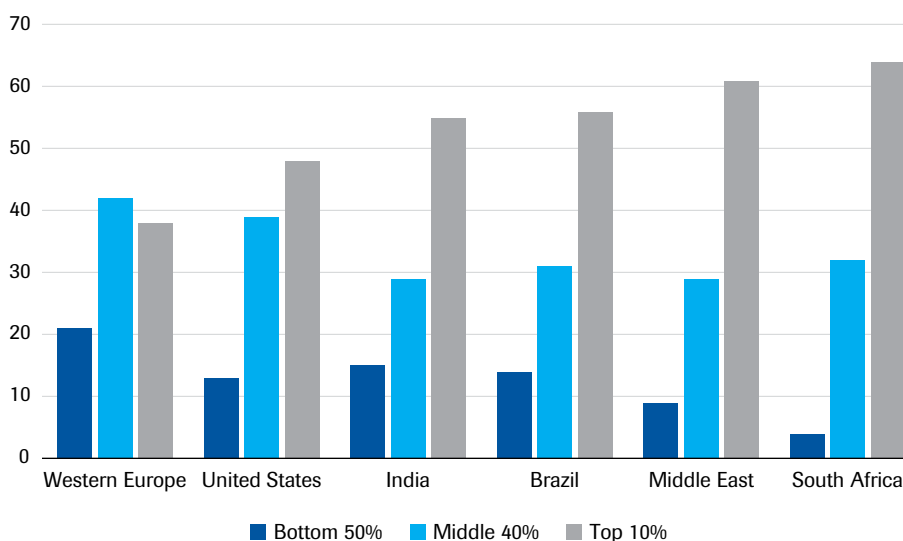
13 For example: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/09/18/the-travails-of-teaching-arabs-their-own-language> (accessed 18 October 2021).

14 The Arab Development Portal, *Labor and Employment Data*, UNDP, 2020, [online](#).

15 The World Inequality Database (WID) can be accessed [here](#). The UAE, Israel, Jordan and Palestine are exceptions. See also more recently: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-59565690> (accessed 13 December 2021).

of the world's more unequal regions. When the aperture of the analytical lense widens to consider inequality of opportunity in addition to inequality of outcome, or when one applies a more integrated framework of inequality beyond income, the picture worsens even further.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 2 Share of national income (%)**



Sources: Assaoud, L., *Inequality and its Discontents in the Middle East*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2020; Alvaredo, F. et al., 'Measuring inequality in the Middle East 1990-2016: The world's most unequal region?', *Review of Income and Wealth*, 2018, [online](#).

Stark inequality *within* countries tends to create and/or reinforce existing rural/urban, gender and ethnic divides.<sup>17</sup> Even in the Gulf states, massive disparities in income and wealth exist, especially between nationals and foreign residents (mostly low-paid migrant workers that the kafala system keeps in a form of modern servitude).<sup>18</sup> Inequality *between* countries in the Middle East creates regional relations of clientelism, with poorer states typically beholden to richer states in one or several dimensions (e.g. Egypt

16 Kirshnan, N. et al., *Uneven Odds, Unequal Outcomes: Inequality of Opportunity in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington: World Bank, 2016, [online](#); UN ESCWA, *Rethinking inequality in Arab countries*, Beirut: UN ESCWA, 2019, [online](#).

17 In Bahrain, for example, Shi'a citizens (the majority of the population) are prohibited from working in entire sectors of the economy, including much of the government and the security forces. See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/09/10/bahrains-shia-crackdown/> (accessed 1 October 2021).

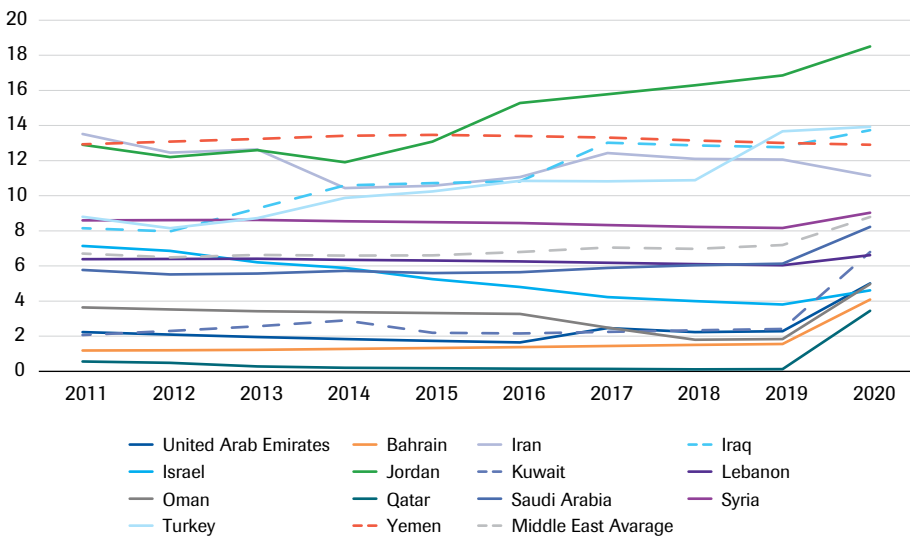
18 POMEPS, *The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf*, Washington: POMEPS, 2019, [online](#).

ceding the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia in exchange for loans and central bank credit). This increases competition between the region’s main powers by reducing the foreign policy autonomy of states such as Jordan and Bahrain, but also Syria and Lebanon.<sup>19</sup>

### Limited possibilities for escape through salaried work

In the face of high levels of poverty and inequality, what about opportunities to improve one’s socioeconomic status through formal labour? Fairly high levels of unemployment in parts of the region show that this is difficult (see Figure 3). Only the Arab rentier states along the Persian Gulf and Israel have relatively low levels of unemployment. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, these countries have fairly small populations and lack inclusive growth due to the dominance of the oil sector and low levels of productivity, with the exception of Israel.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 3 Unemployment in the Middle East as a percentage of the labour force, 2011–2020**



Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database, [online](#) (data retrieved on June 15, 2021).

19 Van Veen, E., ‘The sticky webs of conflict and political order in the Middle East’, *The Defense Horizon Journal*, Special edition, May 2021.

20 World Bank, *Striving for Better Jobs: The Challenge of Informality in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2014, [online](#).

The International Labour Organization notes that unemployment rates have not improved in most Middle Eastern countries since the Arab uprisings of 2011.<sup>21</sup> This is despite the fact that better work prospects were a key demand of protestors and that governments throughout the region have used public sector employment to assuage social discontent. In any case, governments face a double dilemma, which indicates that the limits of this approach are nearing: it is both too expensive to bring a significant percentage of new entrants into the public sector labour force each year and high public payroll bills also reduce the scope for investment needed to diversify the economy.<sup>22</sup>

Given the demographic composition of many Middle Eastern states, youth (un)employment represents an especially difficult policy challenge with numbers roughly double those of general unemployment figures. From 2011 to 2019, youth unemployment averaged around 17 per cent, with increases occurring after 2019.<sup>23</sup> This points to the problematic nature of formal labour markets that are characterised by limited access based on connections (making birth and social class important variables of success) and a sharp divide between the ins and outs in terms of protection. Youth (young women and young men) and women (of all ages) have the lowest levels of access and the poorest prospects. In the relatively young demographics of the region, these two groups represent over half the population.

On a final point, it is worth noting that unemployment figures relate to the formal economy and only represent a small part of the problem. In most of the Middle East, the informal economy is larger than the formal economy and employs more people. In 2014, the World Bank estimated that the average MENA country employs 68 per cent of its labour force in the informal economy,<sup>24</sup> which in turn accounts for about one-third of GDP.<sup>25</sup>

## Corruption as a sign of contempt

It is in the context of high levels of vulnerability to poverty, significant inequality and poor (formal) labour market prospects that corruption acquires greater salience. Specifically, it comes to be perceived as an attribute of self-enriching elites – already wealthy to begin with – and a symbol of contempt for the many that live under challenging day-to-day circumstances. According to Transparency International, 9 out of 14 countries in the Middle East score below 50 in the Corruption Perception Index 2020 that uses a

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21 International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database, [online](#) (data retrieved on 15 June 2021).

22 World Bank, *Middle East and North Africa: Public Employment and Governance in MENA*, 2016, [online](#).

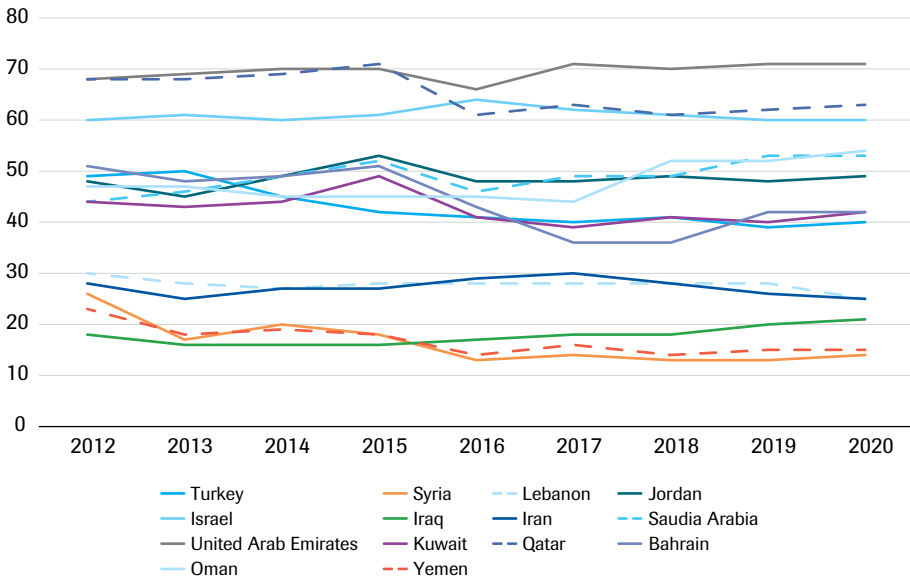
23 International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database, [online](#) (data retrieved on 15 June 2021).

24 Bonnet, F., *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Brief*, Manchester: WIEGO and International Labour Office, 2019, [online](#).

25 World Bank, *Striving for Better Jobs: The Challenge of Informality in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington: World Bank, 2014, [online](#).

scale of 0–100, with Denmark scoring highest at 88. Figure 4 shows the scores. Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen and Lebanon are plagued by very high perceptions of corruption, ranking among the lowest-scoring countries in the world.<sup>26</sup> But Turkey and a few Gulf states also score relatively poorly, i.e. feature significant perceived levels of corruption. Compared with other regions of the world, the entire Middle East fares badly and shows few signs of improvement since 2012.

**Figure 4 Evolution of perceptions of corruption (2012– 2020)**



Note: The vertical axis indicates the scores of individual countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index on a scale of 0 (high perceptions of corruption) to 100 (low perceptions of corruption). The highest-scoring countries are New Zealand and Denmark that score 88 out of 100 (2022).

The prevalence of corruption is linked to the region’s abundance of authoritarian political orders due to the fact that the close and opaque connections between ruling-, business- and security elites facilitate grand corruption.<sup>27</sup> For example, research shows that increases in the price of oil in the Gulf states translate quasi-automatically into increases in the proportion of hidden wealth as elites systematically capture part of

26 Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2020. See: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index> (accessed 1 October 2021).

27 Hanieh, A., *Money, markets and monarchies: The GCC and the political economy of the contemporary Middle East*, Cambridge: CUP, 2018.

national revenues for private use and place it in offshore accounts.<sup>28</sup> Similar problems of rent capture arise in countries with high levels of foreign aid, large financial sector flows, large real estate sectors (e.g. Turkey) and even remittances. Reducing corruption typically requires higher degrees of professionalism and neutrality in the civil service, greater media freedoms and more dynamic civil societies than authoritarian elites are prepared to tolerate.<sup>29</sup>

## Gulf versus the rest of the Middle East?

It is not surprising that the Arab countries bordering the Persian Gulf (except Iraq) score better on nearly all indicators reviewed so far than the rest of the Middle East. Reasons include first and foremost their natural resource wealth, but also their more consolidated and more stable political orders, more capable bureaucracies and relatively small populations (less so in Saudi Arabia).<sup>30</sup> These factors help to translate abundant oil dollars into higher levels of economic prosperity for citizens – with rich elite pickings on top.<sup>31</sup> While Iran and Iraq have similar natural resource wealth, they feature larger and more diverse populations than the Gulf states, less effective bureaucracies, and their political orders are less consolidated. However, the quality of macro-economic and social data in the region is poor<sup>32</sup> and falsification (or data polishing) is a likely practice in quite a few places.<sup>33</sup> For example, it is noticeable how little upward or downward development there is in the poverty, inequality and perception of corruption data despite the occurrence of events that would lead one to expect sharp deterioration

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28 Andersen, J., 'Petro rents, political institutions and hidden wealth: Evidence from offshore accounts', *Journal of the European Economic Association*, January 2017, [online](#).

29 Arab Reform Initiative, *Models for Successful MENA Anti-Corruption Strategies*, 2019, [online](#).

30 To keep perspective, the combined population of the smaller Gulf states amounts to roughly 24 million inhabitants (2020): Kuwait c. 4 million, Bahrain 2 million, the UAE c. 10 million, Qatar c. 3 million and Oman c. 5 million. That is about the same as the cities of Istanbul and Tehran combined. Saudi Arabia adds another 34 million people.

31 In population weighted statistics, the Arab Gulf countries do not count heavily as most of the region's population lives elsewhere. Data visualisations that put tiny UAE or Qatar on a par with population heavyweights like Iran or Turkey risk creating a skewed reflection of reality.

32 Atamanov, A., *Measuring Monetary Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region: Data Gaps and Different Options to Address Them*, Washington: World Bank Poverty and Equity Global Practice, Policy Research Working Paper 9259, 2020 (on household budget surveys).

33 Michalski, T. and G. Stollz, 'Do countries falsify economic data strategically? Some evidence that they might', *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, May 2013, 95(2): 591–616. Fixed exchange rate regimes, high negative net foreign asset positions and negative current account balances particularly tempt countries to tweak data since this can help reduce financial turbulence. As it happens, most countries in the Middle East have, for instance, fixed exchange rates (often intermediate regimes using soft pegs). See: IMF, *Annual Report on Exchange Arrangements and Exchange Restrictions 2019*, Washington: IMF, 2020.



as well as some improvement. In consequence, poverty, inequality, unemployment and perceptions-of-corruption gaps between the Gulf states and the rest of the Middle East could well be smaller than what is commonly assumed.

## Outlook

Over recent decades, a significant part of the Middle East population has been living in poor conditions – defined in terms of poverty, inequality, unemployment and (perceptions of) corruption – with no obvious way out. It is likely that the compounded effects of the Lebanese crisis, several conflicts (Syria, Turkey’s Kurdish areas, Iraq, Yemen), sanctions and Covid-19, among other issues, will tip more people into greater misery. What is less clear is whether such a situation will deepen existing clientelist relationships and practices; create rifts within ruling elites; stimulate greater protests, provoke radical revolutionary movements or induce extremist religious militancy; or even invite greater foreign intervention (e.g. Iran in relation to Shi’a populations). For such answers, we must turn to analysis of the region’s political orders and levels of geopolitical competition.

# 3 Authoritarian political orders and quality of governance

To assess how well the region's political orders might deal with the socioeconomic problems outlined in the previous section, we take stock of the nature of authoritarian governance in the Middle East, the direction of its development and the quality of governance that these orders produce. To begin, the majority of the Middle East's political orders (11 out of 15) are authoritarian in nature, with the remaining four displaying either characteristics of authoritarianism (Israel beyond Israeli Jews; Iraq and Lebanon through elite cartels) or a slide towards authoritarianism (Turkey) (see Table 1).<sup>34</sup> While it is hard to assess the level of popular satisfaction with rule across the region due to the absence of reliable nationwide surveys, two hypotheses can be advanced.

## On the nature of political order

On the one hand, there is substantial tolerance, perhaps even support, for authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, as indicated by the lack of protest in many countries in 2011 and by the durability of their regimes. This may be due to many factors, including the benefits of relative stability, a lack of choice, fear and repression, the dominance of traditional forms of legitimacy and external legitimation. On the other hand, there is also substantial dissatisfaction with the performance of ruling elites across the region in terms of the mix of rights and duties, as well as the level of collective goods and services they produce for their citizens. The 2011 Arab uprisings, protests across Turkey in 2013 and the wave of protests in 2019–2020 in Iran, Israel, Lebanon and Iraq (as well as Sudan, Tunisia and Algeria) testify to this.<sup>35</sup> The Gulf states represent a partial exception as their wealth enables financial largesse to keep (small) populations content more easily and allows for the provision of public goods and services that are of higher quality. Combined with effective repression, this has largely prevented large-scale protests.<sup>36</sup>

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34 In 2020, Freedom House rated Israel as 'free', Lebanon and Kuwait as 'partly free' and the remaining countries of the Middle East as 'not free'. See: <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2021>.

35 Bayat, A., *Revolution without revolutionaries: Making sense of the Arab Spring*, Stanford: SUP, 2017; Jamal, J. et al., *Citizenship 360° in the Arab Region: Perceptions on Sustainable Development across Countries, Income, and Gender*, New York: UNDP/RBAS, 2020.

36 For example, Riyadh announced US\$130 billion in public spending in response to the Arab uprisings. These funds were used to increase public sector salaries, recruit new staff in the security apparatus and launch an affordable housing programme. This was complemented by a solid law and order response, as well as an additional \$200 million for Saudi Arabia's religious establishment to ensure its co-optation. See for instance: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/world/middleeast/09saudi.html?smid=tw-share> (accessed 18 October 2021).

**Table 1** Types of political order in the Middle East

Political order	Short description	Countries (15)
Majoritarian republics	Countries where citizens participate more or less freely in elections, but where minorities are not well protected from majority imposition	Israel, Turkey (2)
Quasi-democratic sectarian states	Countries where citizens participate more or less freely in elections, with political organisations and voting partially based on religious/ethnic affiliation. Electoral and governance systems typically operate as elite cartels that favour incumbent politicians and figures of authority	Lebanon, Iraq (2)
(Semi-) authoritarian states	Countries in which the role of political parties and/or citizens in elections and governance is limited. The centre of political authority resides in bodies or persons with an alternative source of (partial) legitimacy who came to power by military, hereditary or revolutionary means	Jordan, Iran, Palestine, Syria, Yemen (5)
Rentier monarchies	Countries where political power resides in a ruling family that commands significant hydrocarbon rents to finance its preferred style and mechanisms of governance. Hereditary and cradle-to-grave welfare-state legitimacy for an exclusive group of citizens are the basis for rule	Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (6)

Source: Clingendael, [Prospects for political reform across the Middle East, 2021](#).

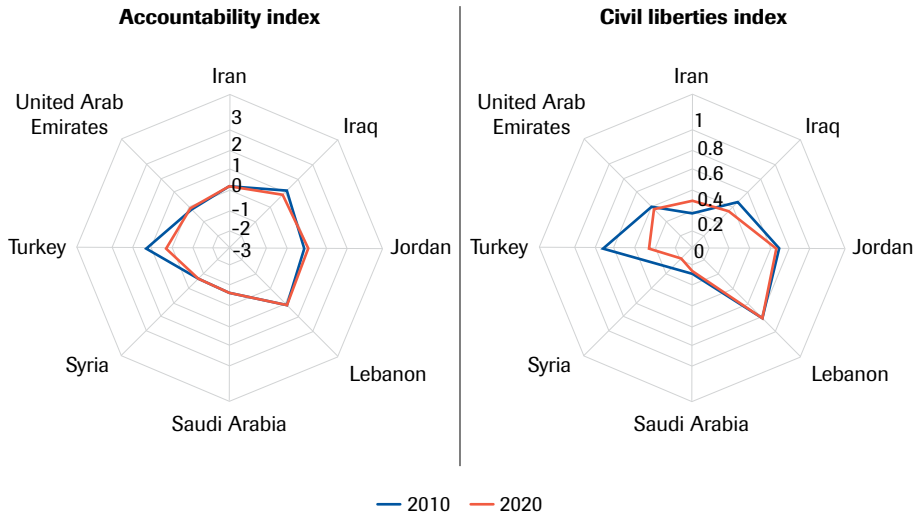
Either way, all three regional powers – Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran – are deepening their level of authoritarianism. Freedom House notes that Turkey continues its now 10-year long decline in freedom while Saudi Arabia continues to linger at the bottom of the Freedom House index in terms of political rights and civil liberties. Iran also finds itself consistently scoring a low 16 to 17 (on a scale of 0–100). Its new government under President Ebrahim Raisi is widely seen as more conservative and more authoritarian.<sup>37</sup> V-DEM notes low and unchanged levels of accountability and civil liberties for most countries in the region between 2010 and 2020, except for deteriorations in Turkey similar to those noted by Freedom House (see Figures 5 and 6 below).

Moreover, Saudi and Emirati support for a return to the pre-2011 status quo has enabled weaker states across the region to remain authoritarian regardless of the Arab uprisings. Consider Bahrain and Jordan, and also Egypt.<sup>38</sup> Iran's expansion across the region has similarly had the effect of maintaining either authoritarian regimes (Syria) or authoritarian groups at the substate level (Lebanon and Iraq) that block accommodation of popular demands for political reform to protect Tehran's own interests. Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Tehran have, each in their own way, enabled a wave of 'counter-revolutions' in the form of authoritarian re-entrenchment. They have also all engaged in transnational campaigns to repress dissidence and resistance through a mix of spyware, social media monitoring, renditions, mobility restrictions, Interpol notifications (especially Turkey) and assassinations (especially Iran).

<sup>37</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2021: Democracy under siege*, Freedom House, 2021, [online](#).

<sup>38</sup> Hoetjes, G., *The Saudi-Emirati axis and the preservation of regional order*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2022.

**Figures 5 and 6 Evolution of accountability and civil liberties in selected countries (2010–2020)**



Source: V-DEM online graphing at <https://www.v-dem.net/en/online-graphing/>.

The basic challenge for authoritarian political orders in addressing poverty, unemployment, corruption and inequality is the interwovenness of their political elites, business tycoons and security commanders. It is difficult to reform at scale or in a radical manner without touching directly on the interests of those elites whose support is necessary to maintain power. It also makes it expensive – even risky – to engage in political modernisation that creates meaningful opportunities for new voices to influence how public authority is exercised and how public funds are allocated.<sup>39</sup> After all, such modernisation amounts to expanding the number of principals in a limited liability company, diluting existing levels of influence. If one adds that authoritarian systems are also good at combining co-optation with repression, it follows that they have no inclination to engage in political reform in terms of restructuring power unless, perhaps, under severe pressure.

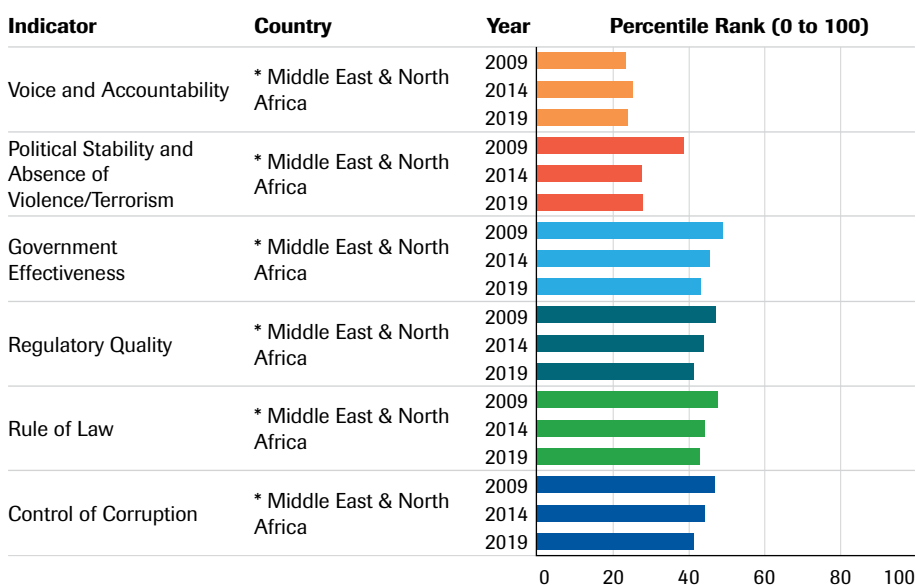
### Quality of governance

In addition to the intent of political orders to govern well and for whom, one must also examine their ability to address poverty, inequality, unemployment and corruption in

39 Springborg, R., *Political economies of the Middle East and North Africa*, Cambridge: Polity, 2020; Hanieh (2018), *op.cit.*

the face of Covid-19, energy transitions, population growth and climate risks.<sup>40</sup> We use governance indicators across the region as a broad gauge of bureaucratic capability. At first glance, Figure 7 suggests only a modest decrease for 5 out of the 6 governance indicators that the World Bank tracks across the MENA. Similar to the aggregate data on poverty and inequality presented in the previous section, this is surprising given the turmoil across the Middle East over the past decade.

**Figure 7 Governance indicators in the MENA (2009–2019)**



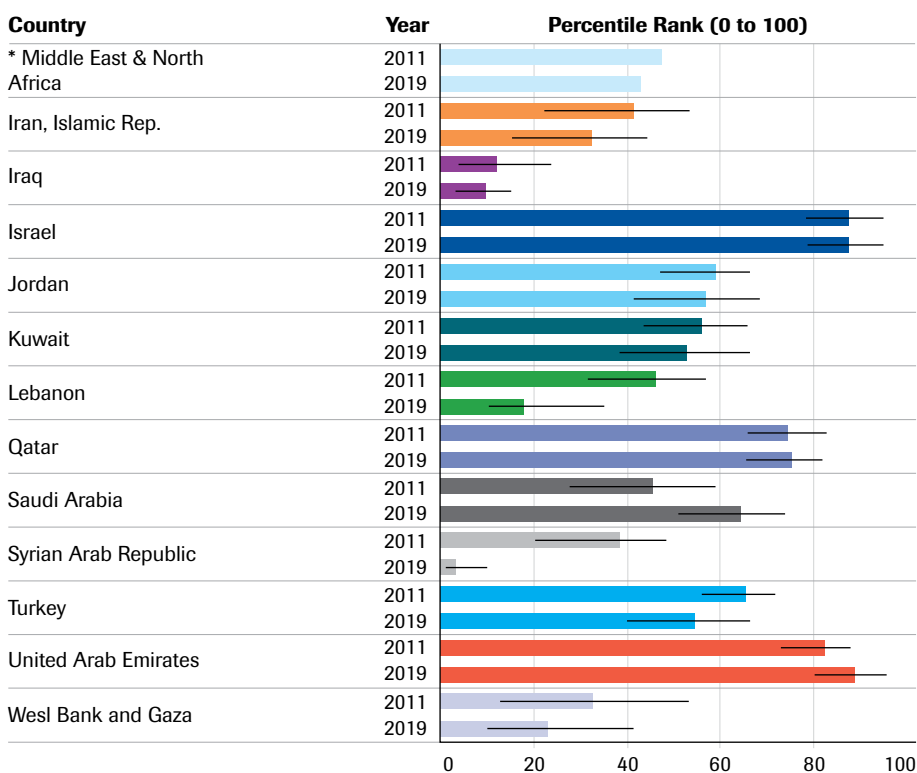
Source: World Bank, <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>

Figure 8 resolves the mystery by breaking the data down by country. On the one hand, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Palestine show clear reductions in the quality of their governance indicators. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the UAE show clear increases. Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and Israel show marginal changes but at very different levels of governance, with Iraq especially featuring low scores compared with the average. In brief, a relatively stable regional average is, again, the sum of a set of countries

40 As to climate change, the mix of rising temperatures and growing water scarcity under conditions of poor cross-border water management, is expected to reduce the available stock of arable land, compounding water insecurity with food insecurity. See: UN ESCWA, *Arab Climate Change Assessment Report: Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region*, Beirut: UN ESCWA, 2017; World Bank, *Water in the Balance: The Economic Impact of Climate Change and Water Scarcity in the Middle East*, Washington: WB, 2020. A recent Chaillot paper notes that the majority of the world's 20 most water-stressed countries is in the Middle East. See: Gaub, F. and C. Lienard, *Arab Climate Futures: Of Risks and Readiness*, EUISS Chaillot Papers No. 170, October 2021.

with poor governance scores and a set of countries with decent to good governance scores. The countries that do well on governance are either less authoritarian (Israel) or resource-rich (most Gulf countries). It is also noteworthy that countries that are home to both internal conflict and to sub-state actors linked with Iran's 'axis of resistance'<sup>41</sup> (see next section) have seen significant reductions in their governance indicators over the period 2011–2019. Furthermore, Turkey's progress in improving the quality of its governance during the first decade of AKP rule (2002–2011) has to some extent been undone. Finally, Syria and Iraq will likely remain 'black holes' in terms of the quality of their governance for the foreseeable future, with Lebanon being in the process of joining them – mirroring the fact that these three countries form the primary zone of regional geopolitical contestation at present (see next section).

**Figure 8 Governance indicators across the Middle East (2011–2019)**



Source: World Bank, <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/> (data retrieved in November 2021).

Note: The thin black lines are error bars. These are graphical representations of data variability.

They indicate the error or uncertainty in a reported measurement.

41 A loose alliance of political parties and armed groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and perhaps Yemen, with Iran as linchpin that is premised on Shi'a political ideology and the aim of opposing US/Israeli influence in the Middle East.

## Outlook

The region's political orders are unlikely to address growing poverty, unemployment, corruption and inequality due to their growing authoritarianism, even though the ability of ruling elites to maintain the status quo and repress any unrest varies considerably. On balance, it is likely that the risk of unrest, crisis or even violence will increase in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, Yemen, and perhaps even Iran in the short term. But a growing long-term risk of unrest and crisis in the Arab Gulf states must also be anticipated.

## 4 The geopolitics of regional conflict

High levels of geopolitical competition in the Middle East are linked both to the sustainability of authoritarianism and the evolution of socioeconomic problems. As to sustaining authoritarianism, high levels of geopolitical competition enable ruling elites to create and frame external threats as existential dangers to the nation.<sup>42</sup> Such securitisation of discourse allows ruling elites to prioritise responses to those threats (including greater resource allocation),<sup>43</sup> discard normal political decision making and label domestic resistance as disloyalty (charges of aiding and abetting ‘terrorism’ are especially popular). It also provides ruling elites with an argument to call for national resistance and sacrifice in the service of the nation. Of course, this recipe is usually applied more to citizens than to elites. Finally, securitisation logically gives security forces, elites and commanders a greater say in national governance and decision making, including purely civilian matters, with the consequence that security reflexes, mindsets and resources grow with time. Moreover, and of more direct relevance, high levels of geopolitical competition lead more easily to armed conflict, which tends to hugely aggravate pre-existing socioeconomic problems.

Regional geopolitical rivalry received at least three important boosts over the past two decades: the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed the country as a leading Arab power and opened the door to greater Iranian influence; the Arab Uprisings of 2011 that caused the Gulf states and Iran to work to restore the conservative authoritarian status quo; and the abrupt US withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018 that intensified conflict between the Emirates, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US on the one hand, and an until-then-compliant Iran on the other hand.

### Core regional alignments

Today, the Middle East consists of three competing alignments of actors that combine classic inter-state collaboration with the incorporation of looser networks made up of state, hybrid and non-state actors (see Figure 9).<sup>44</sup> The dominant alignment consists of the US and

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42 On securitisation: Buzan, B. et al., *Security: A new framework for analysis*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

43 Military expenditure in the Middle East is among the highest in the world. See the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database and the SIPRI Military Balance; also: Springborg (2020), *op.cit.*

44 See also: Van Veen, Erwin, *The Sticky Webs of Conflict and Political Order in the Middle East*, The Hague: Clingendael, May 2021.



its clients-cum-allies: Saudi Arabia, Israel, the Emirates and the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as well as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It overshadows the region in the conventional military and formal economic sense but has lost credibility due to the perception that US commitment to maintaining the regional status quo is wavering, in part due to its pivot to Asia and, more recently, its rapid retreat from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it has pursued an aggressive regional foreign policy over the past few years. For example, the US allowed the Saudis and Emiratis to instigate the Qatar diplomatic crisis in 2017, which led to an extensive boycott and provided Turkey with a significant opportunity to expand its influence. In 2018, the US walked away from the nuclear deal<sup>45</sup> and took a firm stance against Iran, driven at least in part by security concerns and lobbying from Tel Aviv, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (even though the Emirates continued to act as an informal economic conduit around sanctions). In 2020, the US facilitated the Abraham Accords that brought Israel and the UAE closer together as well as, to some extent, Israel and Saudi Arabia via Bahrain. The Accords prioritised the creation of a joint front against Iran over Arab solidarity on the Palestinian issue. They also enabled Turkey and Iran to step up as defenders of the Palestinian cause.

Another alignment consists of Iran and its network of political and armed affiliates across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Yemen. It dominates the region in the unconventional military and informal (including illicit) economic sense. Yet, its appeal is limited among audiences that are not Shi'a and, while it is capable of effective coercion, it is less skilled in the governance required to address glaring socioeconomic problems. All countries in which Iran is influential also face dire social, financial or economic crises. While these cannot necessarily be ascribed to Iran, they do make association with this alignment unattractive and are likely to generate future problems. In this context, Tehran's 'axis of resistance' narrative can be seen as a PR effort to justify sacrifice and accept poor living conditions as the price for standing up to 'Western and imperialist powers'.<sup>46</sup>

A third and smaller alignment consists of Turkey, Qatar and their clients. It is unequal in both its capabilities and agenda, since Turkey is by far the greater and more ambitious partner, but Qatari wealth and influence means they can make themselves count. The grouping has more limited ambitions centred on dominating its extended neighbourhood (Turkey in northern Syria, northern Iraq, Azerbaijan and the Mediterranean) and maintaining sovereignty (Qatar) respectively.<sup>47</sup> Turkey is furthermore involved in a prolonged war of frames, words and court judgments against the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), as well as a military campaign against PKK and YPG across the region, in which Qatar has little part.

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45 Maloney, S., *Under Trump, U.S. policy on Iran is moving from accommodation to confrontation*, Brookings, 2017, [online](#).

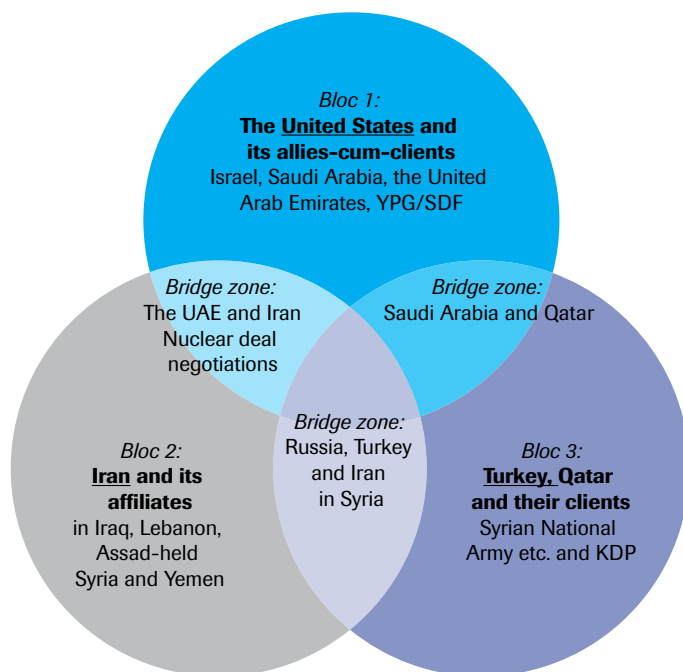
46 For a critical reflection on Iran as 'revolutionary power': Postel, D., *Iran's Role in the Shifting Political Landscape of the Middle East*, New Politics, 7 July 2021, [online](#).

47 Yüksel, E. and H. Tekineş, *Turkey's love-in with Qatar: A Marriage of Convenience*, The Hague: Clingendael, January 2021.

## Rivalry, grey zones and hotspots

These alignments should not, however, be viewed as fixed and existentially opposed categories. To begin with, the groupings centred on Iran and Turkey are not in stark conflict with one another. Even though tensions are growing in Azerbaijan and northern Iraq (e.g. Sinjar) due to Turkey's expanded military activities, these have so far been contained. The primary regional conflict is between the Iran-centred and US-centred alignments. At its core lies Israel's and the Saudis' longstanding hostility towards Iran – and vice versa. Both Tel Aviv and Riyadh are ultimately too weak to contain Iran at the regional level by themselves, but they have so far successfully enlisted the US as their champion. This primary conflict is supplemented by a secondary conflict between the Turkey-centred and US-centred alignments that plays out in the background.

**Figure 9** Key regional blocs shaping geopolitical competition in the Middle East



There are also several grey zones between the blocs that serve as 'bridging' areas and reduce confrontation. For example, the AI-Ula declaration of January 2021 brought Saudi Arabia and Qatar closer together, reflecting Riyadh's historically lower threat perception of the Muslim Brotherhood compared with Abu Dhabi's. In contrast, the UAE has had to remain on better terms with Iran throughout Tehran's confrontation with the US due to the vulnerability of Dubai's trade, financial and logistical hub business

model to Iranian military pressure – as highlighted by its strikes on UAE shipping and the Abqaiq oil facilities in Saudi Arabia in 2019. Another important bridging area is Syria, where Turkish, Iranian and Russian interests have so far proved to be largely compatible, despite recurrent clashes in Idlib. While it is tempting to give Russia's role in the Middle East greater significance in this constellation of three competing regional alignments, it has neither the presence nor capabilities to act as a significant extra-regional influencer except for its intervention in Syria in 2015.<sup>48</sup> Moscow also has its hands full in securing its continued influence in Belarus, Ukraine and Central Asia.

There are, however, a number of hotspots across the region where these alignments clash. Syria and Iraq remain the primary zone of contestation. In Syria, Iran-linked forces together with Russia oppose US- and Turkish-linked forces across the north and northeast of the country. In northern Iraq, contestation increases between Iran-linked groups and Turkey, with the KDP acting as Ankara's accomplice. Iraq also features a smattering of US bases critical to its presence in Syria, which are under regular pinprick attacks from Iran-linked forces. In both countries, a low-level IS insurgency continues.

The waters of the Persian Gulf and Yemen represent secondary zones of contestation. The former is basically an area that Iran uses to signal when economic measures against it become too restrictive and more leeway must be provided. This takes the form of limited but highly targeted military actions. Yemen is a secondary zone because it is too far removed from the heart of the Middle East, even though Iran's links with the Houthis enable it to keep Riyadh focused south rather than north as it strategically should be. Finally, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza are and remain a tertiary zone of contestation between Iran- and US-linked forces. From a geopolitical perspective, it is mostly an escalation area for Iran, which it holds in reserve as a trump card to deter overt and/or direct Israeli and US attacks on Iran itself.

The presence of religious militant groups in the primary zone of contestation – i.e. the likes of IS, Al-Qaeda, Hurras al-Din and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria and Iraq – connects geopolitical competition to political orders across the region. Such militancy is primarily a by-product of authoritarian rule. Ruling elites use religion as a tool to mobilise militants (such as Iran's Shi'a axis of resistance) and/or encourage ultra-conservative forms of religion to maintain power (as in some of the Gulf states). This polarises religious convictions and identity, as well as boosting religious agency, in a manner that serves the interests of ruling elites. Yet, it also enables radical thought and action. The marginalisation of entire population segments by many of the region's authoritarian orders similarly increases the risk of radicalisation. In this sense, religious militants are the canary in the coalmine of authoritarianism and hold up a mirror to

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48 See for example: Lund, A., *Russia in the Middle East*, Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

their own governments.<sup>49</sup> Effective authoritarian systems repress radicalisation at home, but this merely displaces militancy to peripheral or conflict zones where authoritarian control fades. Even though deaths due to terrorism declined steeply after 2017 – the result of a concerted international effort against IS – a revival of sorts might therefore be expected.

## Outlook

The primary regional conflict between Iran- and US-linked alignments will continue whether a new nuclear deal is arrived at or not, with the crucial difference that unsuccessful negotiations will intensify the conflict whereas a successful re-conclusion can dampen it. The absence of a new nuclear deal will continue to tie the US more strongly to the Middle East than it wishes to be in view of China's siren call. It will also prolong the latent risk of an escalatory cycle of tit-for-tat incidents. But as long as Iranian society and its public budget can withstand the economic onslaught of US sanctions, realising a nuclear deal 2.0 is likely to require the US to cut its losses (as it just did in Afghanistan) or settle for less than it played for. The alternative is military strikes on Iran, which is certain to trigger a wider regional conflagration that will make the Syrian war pale in comparison. Meanwhile, Turkey will continue to pursue its regionalised war against the YPG/PYD in Syria and the PKK in Iraq. Turkey's assertive nationalism, especially if infused with more radical forms of political Islam, may yet deepen sectarian polarisation across the region. While recent dialogues are encouraging – especially between Tehran and Riyadh,<sup>50</sup> but also between Ankara and Riyadh as well as between Ankara and Abu Dhabi – underlying conflicts remain unresolved.<sup>51</sup>

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49 UNDP, *Preventing Violent extremism through promoting inclusive development, tolerance and respect for Diversity*, 2016, [online](#); UNDP, *Journey to extremism in Africa: Drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment*, UNDP, 2017; Gomez, A. et al., Why People Enter and Embrace Violent Groups, *Frontiers Research article*, January 2021, [online](#); Gendron, A. (2017), 'The call to Jihad: charismatic leaders and the Internet', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 40, pp. 44–61; Kruglova, A. (2020), 'I will tell you a story about Jihad: ISIS's propaganda and narrative advertising', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 44, Issue 2, 2021; Dawson, L. Dorne, *A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?*, The Hague: ICCT, 2021. The number of European foreign fighters has been relatively small at about 5,000 of an estimated total of 42,000 foreign fighters who joined IS between 2011 and 2016 (its recruitment peak was in 2015). See: Radicalisation Awareness Network Manual (RAN), *Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families*, RAN, July 2017, [online](#); see also: Barrett, Richard, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, Soufan Center, October 2017.

50 See: <https://www.ft.com/content/8665b1d2-b0ca-4dd0-8a18-837e3ad5b110> (accessed 18 October 2021).

51 Asseburg, Muriel and Henkel, S. Charlotte, *Normalization and Realignment in the Middle East*, Berlin: SWP, July 2021.

## 5 Policy directions to consider

Populations across the Middle East face mounting socioeconomic problems in terms of poverty, inequality, corruption and unemployment, while the mostly authoritarian orders governing their lives have limited capabilities – and even less intent – to address such problems in a root-and-branch like fashion. Large-scale reforms are not on the cards and the re-entrenchment of authoritarianism continues across the region, including in its largest countries: Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Tense geopolitical rivalry also worsens socioeconomic problems and sustains authoritarian orders through the securitisation of discourse and policies that distracts from domestic governance shortcomings. US interventions in its capacity as extra-regional power have proven to be uniquely uncondusive to regional stability over the past two decades. Despite recent talks between Ankara, Tehran, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, more crises and brinkmanship are likely in the near term since none of the underlying conflict drivers across the region have been resolved. This indicates more misery lies in store for many in the region and greater negative external effects for those living around it. It may be possible to restructure the vicious cycle of socioeconomic deterioration, authoritarian order and geopolitical rivalry more or less peacefully, but only in the long term as it will require a gradual re-ordering of power and social relations. Faster methods are likely to be far more violent. From this perspective, regional policies that the EU and/or the Netherlands could consider to nudge such processes along fall into several categories:

*Increase efforts to contain conflict in the short term.* From a national security perspective, the EU/Netherlands should invest in conflict containment at a much larger scale to reduce the impact of regional conflict on its own society, but also to diminish its incidence in the Middle East. Interventions can include:

- **Limit practices that enable conflict** – such as stopping arms sales to the region, but also refusing elites from the region second passports (and similar services and goodies) that provide them with an opt-out card when conflict heats up.
- **Increase humanitarian aid** to the region's 18 million IDPs and refugees, as well as the communities hosting them. External support will remain essential for these groups for quite some time and should be maintained as an inadequate international safety net of sorts. Support should be given in ways that improve resilience and economic agency where possible.
- **Impose stricter controls on (illicit) trade** to make it more difficult to finance conflicts through e.g. drug sales, sanction busting (e.g. Syria under Assad) and whitewashing the proceeds of corruption.

- **Stop legitimising authoritarian governments internationally** by elevating their status beyond what is required for the conduct of normal diplomacy. Special welcomes, honours and privileges – such as a Legion d’Honneur for Egyptian President Sisi – should be replaced with a more critical conversation about corruption, human rights and repression. The notion that one can be feted internationally and yet repress an entire society must be discarded as quickly as possible.

*Engage in regional peacebuilding efforts.* From a longer-term conflict resolution perspective, the EU/Netherlands should invest in economic and educational upgrades that create large-scale benefits for populations across the region AND are attractive from a regime survival perspective. Interventions can include:

- **Create a OSCE-type confidence-building platform.** A series of conferences can be initiated through existing centres of relatively independent thought, such as the Lebanese American University (Lebanon), METU (Turkey) and the University of Tehran (Iran), with the aim of informally bringing together individuals who are close to ruling elites over a sustained period of time. The aim is to identify and put in place regional confidence-building measures through dialogue, study visits, research and confidential briefings.
- **Set up a Middle Eastern version of the EBRD or ADB.** The aim is to link such regional dialogue with a practical facility to increase socioeconomic cross-border connectivity where progress allows for it (e.g. electricity supply from the Gulf to Iraq or Turkish-Iraqi joint water management). The facility can be funded in large part by the Gulf countries as a way of boosting their international legitimacy, as long as it is professionally run and governed by all participating states.
- **Initiate a large-scale programme to promote high-quality education and study.** This can for example include founding two or three Lebanese American University-style institutions for independent higher education research with funding for at least a decade. Such establishments should be located either in marginalised areas or make an effort to attract students from marginalised populations. A Middle Eastern version of Erasmus, with EU participation, is another idea.

*Discretely support the right to protest where possible.* More contentiously, enduring protests across the Middle East point to the usefulness of developing clearer and braver protocols to support protests based on international human rights agreements. While political reform in societies cannot be effectively influenced by external parties, nor should it be, defending the right to life, protest and dissent is a fundamental tenet of the corpus of UN values. Interventions can include:

- **Create fast and generous asylum procedures for protestors at risk.** Such procedures can be temporary in nature but should enable protestors whose lives are threatened to exit the country quickly. Short-term protection in embassy compounds

or safe houses could also be an initial option. Recent history has shown that regimes do not hesitate to resort to targeted assassinations and this literally kills both civic engagement and protest.

- **Standardise joint EU demarches against violent suppression of protests in a way that gives them teeth.** Where repression of protest escalates into sustained violence, the EU ambassador in-country should be able to activate a standard protocol for a joint demarche with all EU Member States. Should violent repression nevertheless continue, aid, grants and loans should be made conditional on its cessation in a matter of days.

We outline these proposals on the assumption that the EU/Netherlands have neither the intent nor the capability required to engage in the hard security issues that sit at the core of regional geopolitical rivalry. We also assume that wholesale political reform is not on the cards and/or is difficult to stimulate externally, but that more incremental administrative and policy reform might nevertheless be attractive to ruling elites. If such reforms can be designed in a manner that creates greater opportunities and rights for existing social groups, such as the middle classes, SME owners or cross-border population groups, they can have beneficial civic effects in the longer term.