

## Article

# Pan Arabism 2.0? The Struggle for a New Paradigm in the Middle East

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**Abstract:** The Abraham Accords, signed in September 2020 have helped shed a light on a new discourse emerging from the Gulf that seeks to challenge some of the old dogmas that have dominated the region in the last few decades. A decade of turmoil that followed what was once dubbed as the “Arab Spring” finds a divided region, full of ethnic and religious conflict, ungoverned territories, and the growing reality of failed states. An “axis of resistance”, led by radical elements from both the Shi’a and the Sunni world, is perceived as a growing challenge to a group of actors led by a number of Gulf countries who identify radicalization as an existential threat. Facing the “axis of resistance”, a new “axis of renaissance” is coming of age with an alternative vision that seeks to change the face of the Middle East. In parallel to the rapid decline of the traditional Arab capitals, the Gulf is emerging as a more significant voice in the region due to its economic, political, and media influence. This article seeks to capture and explain the rise of this new Gulf-led axis and the early formulation of a new agenda of a more tolerant Middle East through a radical reshuffling of the order of priorities in the region.

**Keywords:** Islam; Abraham Accords; UAE; Saudi Arabia; tolerance; peace; vision; Israel



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“Today, we are already witnessing a change in the heart of the Middle East, a change that will send hope around the world”, announced Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the UAE’s Foreign Minister, last August at the White House as he signed what came to be known as “the Abraham Accords”.

“This new vision”, he continued, “is not a slogan . . . at a time when science is prevailing, the region’s youth are looking forward to taking part in this great humanitarian movement”. This will spur the “momentum towards stability and the growth of human potential, in a new civilized approach that opens wide the doors of opportunity for those who look towards peace, prosperity, and the future ([Times of Israel Staff 2020](#))”.

This “new thinking”, with the words “new” and “change” appearing 21 times (*ibid.*), may seem clichés to some, as slogans are easier to find than an actual change of course in the Middle East. However, we will attempt to argue that behind these words hide a more ripe paradigm, fostered by a growing “camp of change” in the Middle East. Those who have subscribed to it seek to redefine the region. They contend that the area can not only be categorized by ethnic, religious, and tribal rifts, but also by those who believe in the restoration of the past and those who believe in the urgency of creating a new future. The Gulf states, along with a few other countries, are the leading proponents of this new paradigm, and are working to create a new vision for a region enveloped by conflict and war. Although such idealism appears far removed from places such as Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, or Syria where tribal politics and proxy wars continue to rage, it resonates with young people in the region, as well as some of the elite who have continually sought to reorient what they see as the dangerous direction the region has taken. This paradigm is also not divorced of crude interests of the camp from which it emerges, a camp that already

adopted a path of modernization and for which ethnic and sectarian politics are considered an existential threat.

The recent Abraham Accords and votes for further engagement with Israel have pushed the population to further engage with these ideas. While the move was certainly not welcomed in every corner of the broader Middle East, it was also not rejected as was the case with Egypt who found itself expelled from the Arab League ranks following its signature of the Camp David Accords. After all, much has changed since Egypt began the path of peace with Israel. Today, over half of the Arab population lives in countries that have normalized relations with Israel, while much of the other half lives in failing states. This illustrates the dichotomy between those who hold an affinity toward a path of progress and tolerance, which appears to yield prosperity, as opposed to those who continue to uphold sectarian and conflict-driven politics, despite decades of carnage and chaos. In September 2021, a group of 300 Iraqis dared to make that very argument in Erbil: “We can live under the repression of terrorism, or we can die with courage”, stated Dr. Sahar Karim al-Ta’i, an Iraqi cultural official in a conference that called for Iraq to join the trend for normalization with Israel. “It is precisely because of these elements—terrorism, violence—that [it is] necessary to take a decisive step” (Berman 2021).

As expected, the conference triggered significant condemnation and death threats to its participants. However, it also made headlines throughout the Arab world and echoed a deeper ongoing discussion about how to restore the region’s past glory as the cradle of civilization and progress: Will this happen via the restoration of “Arab Unity”, an “Islamic State”, or another revolution? Or will the failure of these visions might pave the way for a different path of renaissance and prosperity?

The “Arab Cause”, in its singular form, was never easy to pursue and implement, even though resistance against a common enemy remained one of the few Arab mobilizing forces. However, the growing Arab world, now numbering over 425 million (a significant growth from the Nasser era where the Arab population was only 92 million) (The World Bank IBRD-IDA 2021) is divided into 22 Arab countries who experienced a decade of turmoil and internal disputes, resulting in further disunity amongst Arab nations. The 21st century found the Middle East younger and more educated than ever, with over 65% under the age of 30 (Euromonitor International 2012) and ready for change. Intra-state disputes and rapid changes within Arab society made it impossible for them to rally behind a common cause, which first began with the Arab Spring and ended with the collapse of Syria, Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, and Iraq. This chaotic decade was the result of the following factors which weakened supporters of resistance politics and armed struggle: the return of tribal and identity politics, the rise of non-state powers which peaked with the phenomenon of the Islamic State, the proliferation of Arab media, the collapse of old leadership, and the growing call for change and reform in Arab politics. Resistance groups have been inspired to forcefully implement ideas prevalent in resistance politics. The Islamic State preached a radical version of resistance and Islamist politics. So did Shi’a groups, militias such as Hezbollah and proxies of Iran. However, now, resistance has turned inward. Resistance groups and the drive to suppress them led to the killing over half a million people in Syria (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2020) and hundreds of thousands in Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. In the new approach, resistance is no longer viewed as the key for political redemption; rather, it is perceived as an obstacle preventing a better future.

These developments have triggered a shift in the thinking of many in the region. For the first time in half a century, a new alignment between the rulers, the ruled, and leaders in the Arab world is challenging the inertia of the mid-20th century Arab political arrangement. While it is unlikely that these new ideas will defeat the entire “axis of resistance”, it is becoming clear that they have formed a new camp which is challenging and changing Arab and Middle Eastern politics.

## 1. New Generation, New Priorities

Young Arabs in the 21st century are living in a different reality to that of their parents and grandparents. To begin with, there is a larger and younger population, with more than 28% of the Middle East population being between the ages of 15 and 29 (Probst and Scharff 2019). This is the largest number of young people to transition to adulthood in the region's history. However, future prospects, are not always bright; Tunisian youth make up 33% of the labor force, yet account for 75% of the unemployed, with youth unemployment continuing to rise following the decade of turmoil. Contextually, youth unemployment is estimated to be 30% for people aged 15–24, compared to 12% worldwide (Al-Sayyid 2018). The decade of turmoil has affected the region in other ways, as 55.3% of world refugees are Arab, with 36.1% of the world refugees residing in the Arab region (Arab Development Portal Team 2021). The clear relationship between unemployment and the growing risk of political instability has been substantiated by many scholars (Azeng and Yogo 2013; Prince et al. 2018); it is understood that stability may be the only key to prosperity and, thus, the antidote to further radicalization.

The “Arab Spring Generation” of restive, young, and educated Arab Youth have clearly asserted new priorities. Access to formal education has had significant implications for Arab expectations of their living conditions. Evidence of this can be found through the Dubai-based research group ASDA'A BCW: every year since 2008, the group has conducted the “Arab Youth Survey” among Arabs aged 18–24 in an attempt to understand the priorities of Arab youth. Several insights can be understood from this:

### 1.1. Religious Fervor Seems to Be in Decline, and Religion Is Seen as a Source of Concern

ISIS (the Islamic State) at its peak was perceived by youth to be the biggest threat to the region (Steinbuch 2016). The 2019 survey found out that 79% of young Arabs believe that the Arab world needs to reform its religious institutions, meanwhile 66% believe that religion plays too great a role in the Middle East (Samir 2019).

### 1.2. Security and Economy Are Top Priorities

When asked, in 2015 and 2016, what the biggest obstacle facing the Middle East was, Arab youth prioritized ISIS and the threat of terrorism (ASDA'A BCW 2016), followed by unemployment, civil unrest, and the rising cost of living. Subsequent surveys further stressed the economic factors: rising cost of living, unemployment, and slow economic growth (ASDA'A BCW 2019). In the 2020 survey following the COVID-19 pandemic, which deeply affected the Middle East, 87% of Arab youth reported concerns about future employment whilst over a third reported that they were in personal debt (ASDA'A BCW 2020). Political concerns such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain prevalent, although it is framed in significantly less dogmatic language and is less of a concern. Unlike the classical ideological prism of Arab Nationalism or Islamism, which gave it rhetorical primacy over all other concerns, present political concerns tend to be linked to personal considerations rather than ideological concerns. Quoting journalist Faisal al Yafai, “The concern young Arabs have over the Palestinian-Israeli issue; fears over terrorism; and an uptick in fears that relations between Sunni and Shia communities are getting worse; all are issues that could hinder political stability and economic growth (al Yafai 2019)”.

### 1.3. Youth Regard the Gulf Positively

For the ninth year running, the UAE remains the “country of choice” for young Arabs to live; 46% of young Arabs named UAE as their preferred country of residence, followed by the US and Canada (ASDA'A BCW 2020). Arab youth see Saudi Arabia (39%), Qatar (34%), and the UAE (18%) as the leading powers in the Arab world, whereas only 5% see Egypt as a leading power today (ibid.).

After analyzing a decade of public opinion polls, Washington Institute scholar David Pollack concluded that the current “trajectory of Arab public opinion is increasingly toward what could reasonably be called moderation: to reject religious extremism, to oppose Iran's

hegemonic ambitions and proxies, to accept some kinds of normalization with Israel, and to look for pragmatic steps forward rather than sweeping ideological movements in most areas of public life". This trend, he argues, is particularly true of the younger generation under the age of 30, representing half of the Arab population. More significantly, the surveys demonstrate that the older generation, which controls the discourse and practical implementation of policies, is not far behind the youth in terms of this attitudinal trend (Pollock 2021, vol. 24, p. 110). The data shows a new emerging list of priorities of the Arab public, marking a drastic departure from the fixation on national and religious causes towards a focus on individual concerns.

Nowhere is this reality more obvious than in the participating countries of the Co-operation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC). These include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The Arab Gulf youth are the most educated in the Arab world. According to the World Economic Forum, the Gulf States' female education parallels some of the world's most developed nations. In addition, the UAE is home to the highest percentage for college-educated women in the world (Miller 2016, pp. 240–41).

Moreover, the youth of the GCC countries today live in the most globally integrated region in the Arab World. Following the Arab Spring and a decade of uprising, with sectarian and proxy wars, the MENA region was the only part in the world to experience a decrease in its level of "global connectedness", a measure for degrees of globalization. However, the GCC countries are the exception to this rule, due to their increased connectedness and stronger integration into the world economy (ibid., p. 227). The Arab Gulf youth are more globally integrated, more likely to speak a foreign language, more likely to attend college, and become tech-savvy and have more access to international travel. A combination of formal education, international interconnectivity, and the ability to pursue opportunities in global cities without travel restrictions as well as economic success have naturally created individual aspirations outside of collective ideological endeavors. This deeply affects self-image and self-object identification, as globalized youth may identify with others in similar conditions regardless of ethno-religious background. This is not dissimilar to the high-tech industry which forms a thoroughly international global community.

Gulf leaders understood these observations, and sought to offer a vision more in tune with the young generation of the Middle East. This can be seen through the fact that the leaders increasingly analyze public opinion polls and integrate them into their governing strategies. Contrary to popular perceptions, Arab monarchies seriously consider the opinions of their subjects; Saudi rulers, for example, increasingly rely on the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue to understand and address public attitudes (Pollock 2021, vol. 24, p. 104).

UAE Ambassador to the US, Yousef Al Otaiba, spoke about an "effort to offer a new vision for young Muslims and the region, an alternative ideology, unafraid of modernity, and looking to the future. It's a path guided by a phrase oft-repeated by Muslims all around the world: 'In the name of God, the most merciful and most compassionate. Respect, inclusion, peace; these are the true tenets of Islam. Ours is an Islam that empowers women, embraces others, encourages innovation, and welcomes global engagement'" (Emirates News Agency (WAM) 2016).

## 2. Intellectual Departure, a New Arab Agenda

The "Arab Spring" and subsequent events profoundly shocked the region, as it had become accustomed to an old-order formula, which had succeeded in maintaining stability at the expense of economic freedoms and cultural and political expression. The demise of "invincible" autocrats and dictators unleashed forces which continue to shape the region. New cultural struggles as well as differing identities and loyalties emerged, unfortunately resulting in carnage, death, and displacement. Some societies have returned to sectarianism and tribalism; others to popular autocracy. This reshuffling of how people self-identify has allowed for new introspective conversations and examination of the legacy of a century

of discord, drawing new paths for Arab identity. These new conversations have taken advantage of the decline of traditional seats of Arab intellectual life and the emergence of new ones: Cairo is hungry (Megahid 2020), Damascus collapsed, Beirut is burning and bankrupt, and Baghdad is torn. Today, an Arab aiming to influence the Arab zeitgeist or the society as a whole no longer seeks their fortune in the traditional cultural capitals of the Arab world. Rather, they turn to the Arab Gulf.

The transition from Cairo and Damascus as the former strongholds of nationalist intellectuals and the Arab left is more than a geographic turn. The new, modern, and cosmopolitan Arab Gulf cities are the current location of the “golden era” that once resided in Beirut, the “Paris of the Middle East”, and Cairo, the “cultural capital” of the region. This move has liberated contemporary discourse in the Arabic-speaking world from the burdens of the past, the wars with Israel, and the blood of martyrs. Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh are not regular urban centers but are at the core of an experiment that seeks to build a global national identity. Cultural trends in these cities aim to make the Gulf’s population full members of the globalized world (Kamrav 2020). Gulf cities seek to function as cross-sections between nationalism and globalism—both working in conjunction with the other—in order to redefine a given city as a global urban center. This reconfiguration of Arab urban and intellectual life has resulted in a reconfiguration of the discourse concerning new aspirations and fears; as the Arab strategic weight shifts to the east, so does the focus.

Resistance politics can be defined as a pool of diverse Arab political discourses united in their emphasis on militancy and antagonism towards Israel and the US beyond all other political goals or as the primary vehicle to achieve other goals. The primary ideological articulations of resistance politics were produced in the 1960s, epitomized in Arab nationalist slogans such as “unity is the path to Palestine” or, conversely, “Palestine is the path to unity”, and were heavily inspired by the USSR, China, and Northern Vietnam (Sayigh 1997). Around the same timeframe, Islamist thinkers such as Sayyed Qutb were laying the foundation of a parallel Islamic discourse that started to receive wide currency in the 1970s. Resistance was the only familiar and identifiable political project for large segments of the Arab masses, as it united the different political ideologies and in turn became an expression of moral political truth. Claims to resistance became claims to legitimacy, and so opposition to resistance politics was perceived to be an assault on legitimacy; this has resulted in a fiery Arab political rhetoric in support of resistance groups. A telling instance was the declaration of Egypt’s charismatic Gamal Abdul Nasser on 22 October 1968, that “the standing of any Arab state depended on its policy towards the [armed resistance] guerrilla movements (Sayigh 1997; *ibid*, p. 191)”. This same legacy of legitimacy can be seen to be manifesting in the Iranian desire to spearhead a “resistant axis”, which should be understood as an attempt to gain the legacy of legitimacy for regional hegemony. Today, increasing numbers of Arabs are realizing that there is an urgent need to shift away from resistance politics.

This reshaping of the “Arab agenda” is beginning to cause an open deconstruction of the old one, with Arab writers starting to channel the wisdom of prioritizing “resistance” in politics. This is an open ideological assault on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Assad–Hezbollah– Hamas–Muslim Brotherhood’s so-called axis of resistance. Recently, the Kuwaiti daily Al-Jarida published an op-ed by the Shi’a writer Khalil Haider, examining Iran’s destructive role in militarizing Arab Shi’a communities. On the issue of Hezbollah, he wrote, “How tragic was it that legalists, activists, and academics in the Arab World never questioned the legitimacy of bypassing and ignoring the laws of the Lebanese state and the undermining of civic freedoms by ‘Hezbollah’, and did not forcefully and loudly criticize the fact that Hezbollah, a Lebanese faction tied to a foreign state [Iran], is, in fact, a military mightier than the state’s military. Hezbollah has military and security capabilities which are not subject to any clear legal oversight and is able to insert the entire country into destructive wars whenever it wishes!” (Haider 2021).

His article was picked up by Mashari Al-Zaidi, a Saudi writer in the London based pan-Arab daily, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. Zaidi commended Haider on his article and used it as

a foundation for a public condemnation of the Arab Sunni intellectual elite (Al-Zaidi 2021). He named figures such as Mohamed Hassanin Heikal as responsible for creating a foundational “secular theology of resistance”, which now serves no one but the Ayatollahs and has brought wholesale destruction to Arab states in what he called, “the crime of the Arab elites (ibid.)”. These sentiments are similarly expressed by others, and feature regularly in Arab press and media, with the obvious exception of Qatar-based Al-Jazeera, due to its ideological commitment to pan-Islamic identity.

Another notable article was recently published by the veteran Lebanese political thinker Hazem Saghyia, openly wondering if the Arab devotional commitment to Palestine above all else is responsible for the failure of the institution of democracy and the Arab Spring at large. The Saudis further accused Palestinian leaders of betraying their people, which signaled an erosion of Saudi support for an issue long considered sacrosanct (Kershner and Hubbard 2020). Whilst some of the Saudi discourse related specifically to Saudi-Palestinian disputes, it should also be understood as a shift in the way the broader Arab discourse is framed. The “Palestinian cause” was a convenient tool for autocratic dictators seeking a convenient scapegoat, and was useful for Islamic radicals who found it to be a simple rallying point (Al-Shehi 2021). However, when Islamism became the main threat and Iran (which continues to rally Palestinian resistance) became a major concern, these dissenting voices become synchronous with the new emerging regional thinking which does not accept Islamists or Iranian sympathizers. State-sponsored tolerance in the form of multi-confessional museums and religious compounds became a leading motto in the Gulf, which is an important development as it has enabled the existence of a multiethnic society of residents and religious groups from over 200 nationalities (Emirates News Agency (WAM) et al. 2020). A Ministry of Tolerance was established in the UAE in 2016 and a “year of tolerance” was announced in 2019 (UAE Government Portal 2021). Similarly, Bahrain has increased its involvement in tolerance, dialogue, and interreligious initiatives, declaring “tolerance as part of Bahrain’s identity (Bahrain News 2016)”. Even Saudi Arabia adopts the language of tolerance as well as its recent distancing from Wahhabism and political Islam (Jacoby 2020).

Granted, one might detect a degree of opportunism and even cynicism in some of these moves—especially considering the history of “religious tolerance” of countries such as Saudi Arabia. However—and with the above in mind—Islamist radicals or those supporting the “axis of resistance” are a real threat to this endeavor developing in the Gulf, where stability is seen more as a key to ensuring prosperity and a safer future. Holy wars, at least at the moment, are no longer welcome. Moreover, since religious symbolism and ideological mobilization are the resistance camp’s weapon of choice, it only makes strategic sense to attempt neutralizing such a weapon.

New voices are emerging across the region, as for the first time since the Arab Nationalist era, the interest of the rulers, the ideas of the thinkers, and the needs of the street are converging. Tareq Al-Hameed, a Saudi prominent journalist and the former editor of Al-Sharq al-Awsat, wrote in February, “. . . our region today is in dire need of establishing the concept of sovereign statehood regardless of European or American policies. The region has to give priority to the language of interests, political reasonability, and revisiting concepts such as peace [ . . . ] this will inaugurate a language of interests and sincere cooperation and not slogans and guarantees we will not revert to the age of resistance and mendacious oppositionality”. Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, further echoed these sentiments when he spoke last April on Islamic reform; he challenged Wahhabism, the radical Islamist ideology which reigned for a significant period and was promoted by the Saudi establishment throughout the Muslim world. He called for a re-interpretation of Islamic dogma, claiming that “If Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdulwahhab were with us today and he found us committed blindly to his texts and closing our minds to interpretation and jurisprudence while deifying and sanctifying him he would be the first to object to this. There are no fixed schools of thought and there is no infallible person. We should engage in continuous interpretation of Quranic texts and the same goes for the sunnah of the Prophet

PBUH, and all fatwas should be based on the time, place, and mindset in which they are issued (Abderrahmani 2021)".

A quick summary of what was printed in the same publication only a decade ago may shed light on the significance of these ideas. On April 6th 2009, Saudi Prince Turki Al-Faisal, a veteran diplomat and a former Saudi ambassador to the US, wrote, "Inter-Arab disagreements are affecting our mutual causes at their center . . . and it is drawing us far from our essential issues: the consequences of the American barbaric invasion of Iraq, the Israeli barbaric occupation to Palestine and Syrian and Lebanese territories, Israeli's war against Lebanon and the Palestinian people . . . the Palestinian cause was and remains the cause of all the Arabs". This was the kind of rhetoric common in the pre-Arab Spring era. Very different voices are now being printed on the same pages.

In our examination of the social and intellectual spheres, we were able to identify a discernible shift in the social body and the intellectual mind. However, has this shift produced a new political will? A mixture of newly acquired self-confidence in one's own weight as well as the perception of regional volatility and American unreliability is driving the Gulf states to take the lead. This process is still relatively new, and it has been described by scholars such as Jones, Porter, and Valerie, as the "Gulfization of the Arab world" (Jones et al. 2018), in which the Gulf has assumed the center stage of the Arab Middle East "politically, economically, culturally, and militarily".

Today, it is no secret that the strategic weight of the Arab state system is in the Gulf. Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Doha are the capitals in control of Arab politics. Doha, however, will be excluded from this discussion as it remains outside of the Gulf Consensus which is leading a larger block including Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco and, more so, Israel.

The rapid modernization of the Gulf in the last two decades has been part of a regional shift, where the emerging Gulf cities have become safer and more modern compared to the rapid decline of the traditional Arab capitals of Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus (Papadopoulos 2019). The annual Gulf Business poll of the 100 most powerful Arabs of 2015 showed that of the top 50, only 5 come from Arab countries outside of the GCC (Miller 2016, p. 278). The symbolic value of this gradual shift is not merely geographical, and should not be underestimated; it is a recognition of a working political system and society which has become a model for many in the region. This process is deliberate, as the UAE sees itself as the emerging cultural hub of the Middle East and a "starting point for cultural exchange (ibid., p. 30)". The UAE Ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, described his country as "a safe haven of stability, opportunity and tolerance in the most difficult of neighborhoods (Emirates News Agency (WAM) 2016)". Granted, the Gulf system is not immune from problems and issues, from human and workers' rights to women's right via royal court politics and failed military campaigns that have taken countless Arab lives (al Muslimi 2015). Gulf-related criticism is due in a number of other areas as well—however, this does not take away the growing weight and impact of the Gulf on Arab and Middle Eastern politics.

It is important to mention that Gulf cities are a core element of the Gulf state structure (Kamrav 2020); the expansion of infrastructure, economic dynamism, cultural vitality, and plans of diversification, as well as the importation of Western higher education institutions, can be categorized as efforts towards state and national identity building. The success of such efforts in creating attractive and globally promising cities, as well as the creation of new national identities which enable the Gulf populations to integrate into the global network, have endowed the Gulf rulers with the self-confidence to make assertive political decisions.

A key pillar and vehicle in the "Gulfization" process contributing to the influence of the Gulf in the Arab world is the rise of new regional and pan-Arab media. Arab news and media are increasingly dominated by the three Gulf capitals: Al-Arabiya from Riyadh (with 306 million viewers (Forbes 2021)), Aljazeera from Doha (with 277 million viewers (ibid.)), and Sky News from Abu Dhabi (with 50 million viewers (Flanagan 2011)). Interestingly, media competition comes not from within the region, but from the Russian state media RT

Arabic, the US' Al Hurra, British BBC Arabic, and Chinese CCTV (Forbes 2021; RT 2015). With regard to the press, during the last few decades, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar were able to purchase many of the largest Arab newspapers, which created a situation akin to monopoly of the largest press outlets, especially in the hands of Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Brookings Institute 2018). The emergence of highly developed autonomous Gulf media provides an opportunity for new narratives. Nearly one year prior to the announcement of the Abraham Accords, a co-produced UAE-Kuwaiti TV show, "Umm Haroun", portrayed the life of a Gulf Jewish community in the first half of the twentieth century. Another Saudi-produced series of Umm Haroun depicted a debate not on whether Israel should exist, but whether doing business with Israelis is permissible (Chulov and Safi 2020). This shows that the Gulf and Saudi efforts to build new paths are systematic, long-term, and likely to be based on a clear strategic agenda of a changing regional discourse.

One of the main aspects of such a contribution is the resolution of the legitimacy crisis which has overshadowed the Arab state system since the end of the colonial era. If Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and to some extent Lebanon were further delegitimized by a legacy of failure, the opposite is true for the Gulf. We say "further delegitimized" because the issue of Arab state legitimacy has not been resolved since the Arab Nationalist and Islamist assertion that the system is built on artificial borders and colonial mal-intervention. Arab monarchies never suffered from this crisis to the same extent as Arab republics, due to their long legacies and foundation on ancient tribal institutions. They therefore enjoyed a greater level of stability in what some dubbed as "Arab monarchical exceptionalism". The success of the monarchies in offering their inhabitants more security, prosperity, and limited modernization only served to free such states from any burdens or former legitimacy constraints such as the Arab League consensus.

The arrival of this new reality was the Arab Spring of 2011, during which the situation became clear. However, while the Arab Spring dissolved old constraints, it also created new ones: the unreliability of the United States' foreign policy, the Iranian threat, and the rise of Sunni Islamism. Those new threats convinced Gulf rulers that it was no longer possible to remain passive reactors and that it was a strategic imperative to take the lead in shaping Arab strategies in confronting regional challenges and move away from the old paradigm of resistance politics that drive the Iranian-led axis of resistance today. Nasser's shibboleth from the 1960s tying an Arab state's favorable standing to its support of resistance has been revived, albeit reversed.

### 3. The US, the Middle East, and the Gulf?

The perception of American unreliability was formed primarily due to four American policies: the withdrawal of American support from the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 Egyptian uprising, the tacit approval of the Muslim Brotherhood's power grab, the failure to punish the Syrian regime for gross violations of international law, and, most importantly, the production of the much-contested JCPOA in relation to Iran. The fact that the vehement opposition of Gulf rulers to such policies failed to convince the American foreign policy establishment to alter its course of action supported the conclusion that the US is no longer the ally it once was.

A brief summary of the historical Gulf-US relationship is in order. Unlike most of the solid United States alliances, the alliance with the Gulf was never built upon the ideological commitment to democracy or liberalism, but rather on three foundational pillars: stability, transparency, and mutual interests. Those pillars are what guided the Gulf-US relationship through the storms of Arab-Israeli wars, the Cold War, Gulf wars, 9/11, and the rise of Gulf-funded global terrorism. However, these very pillars appeared to have eroded in the period of growing turmoil in the region since 2011. The United States is perceived to have pushed the region towards instability, was not transparent with its allies regarding Iran, and seems to no longer pursue what Arabs understand to be their own interest. For Arab rulers, this was in effect the nullification of a marriage contract and a moment of awakening.



Given the above situation, Gulf rulers were forced to begin building a strategy independent of the United States, which in some areas undermined American policies. This new strategy is multidimensional, and assumes the role traditionally played by the United States: it supports Arab regimes such as Sisi in Egypt, engages militarily with insurgencies in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, attempts to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood politically, socially, and ideologically, and contains Iran. Those new overarching goals demanded major strategic shifts in the list of priorities, pushing for vast religious, legal, and social reforms, as well as building strategic alliances with Israel that can be witnessed today across the Gulf. Luckily, the emergence of a more worldly and less ideologically inclined young Arab generation and intellectual class with a new discourse allowed this agenda to permeate through society and become a viable option for Arab social and political structures. In other words, Arab rulers must now depend on popular support for their policies, as a result of which young women may now freely enter public spaces, movie theaters, and concerts.

It is important to understand that Israel is at the center of the above discussion. It is seen as a player in the camp of regional stability, a gateway for economic diversification and development, a key in containing Iran, and, most importantly, attempts to alienate Islamist ideologies from the mainstream. Moreover, since Islamists have cherished the anti-normalization agenda as their cause, it will be more natural for the pragmatists to adopt the exact opposite alternative.

A conglomerate of changes resulted in the combinatorial effect of freeing Gulf rulers from traditional rhetorical and financial commitments to resistance politics and created a need to move towards Israel. As the Gulf states gained legitimacy, the need to use pan-Arab or pan-Islamic causes for legitimacy disappeared and, as a result, the legitimating effect of the Palestinian cause became weaker. With the notable exception of Bahrain and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, the Arab Gulf survived the Arab Spring with no serious challenge to its states' legitimacy. The paternalistic tribal contract between rulers and the ruled proved to be durable. Moreover, the legitimating effect of the anti-Israel stance remains one of the primary vehicles of the political projects of Islamism, which directly undermines the Gulf's stability and legitimacy. In different Arab capitals, the Palestinian Cause is primarily used as a polemical device by political agents, both secular and Islamists, that wish to challenge the legitimacy of Arab rulers. As an Arabic proverb states, the sword, which was once yours, is now against you. By normalizing relations with Israel and pushing for social ties between the societies, the Gulf is killing several birds with one Abrahamic stone: striking the legitimacy claims of their rivals, distancing their population from the lure of resistance politics, creating a security alliance against Iran which in turn shifts the geopolitical weight away from dependence on American policy, and building ties with the only innovative economy in the region.

The aforementioned changes suggest that the Middle East is witnessing a dramatic shift where a new Arab political consciousness is taking shape and attempting to change the regional socio-political realities. This movement has been made possible by a rare moment of alignment between the will of the most powerful and stable rulers in the region, a new intellectual discourse, and a young population segment with different interests than the older generation, who are ready for change. The Arab state system may still lack the means of direct democratic governance, but this recent movement is the closest shift toward a political agenda built upon the interests and aspirations of a wide socio-political coalition. Our conclusion is that much of our analytical lenses for understanding Arab politics, mostly forged during the last century, are becoming obsolete. The Arab state system can no longer depend on 20th century Arab rhetoric, nor on an unquestionable alliance with the United States.

Arab states are likely to pursue an agenda of global diversification of alliances and mutual commitments, particularly with China and Russia, given China's influence in the region and Russian primacy during the Syrian crisis. If the current momentum continues, there is reason to believe that the influence of resistance politics will decline; pockets of Islamism and resistance politics in the region will have diminished influence and may

increase their reliance on foreign allies. Given the proliferation of sympathy to resistance politics in Western countries, the antagonism between the new Arab coalition and Western institutions is likely to increase. Despite public opinion, which may gravitate towards the Palestinian cause in times of tension as it did during the May 2021 Gaza escalation, we argue that the broader trend will sustain the new paradigm. This was noted by Dr. Ebtessam Al Ketbi, President of the Emirates Policy Centre, who wrote on possible ramifications of the Gaza escalation on the Abraham Accords: "I do not believe that the military escalation in Gaza and Israel will push for a reconsideration of the Abraham Accords. The agreement was a strategic decision made by its signatories . . . Lessons must be learnt from what has happened in order to cement the sense of moderation and tolerance that form the basic foundations on which the Abraham Accords were established (Al Ketbi 2021)". Moreover, the last round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was marked by a noticeable absence of Arab public outrage, except for a few minor cities, as well as the traditional Arab moral upstaging game of ratcheting up commitments to the Palestinian Cause.

#### 4. A Look from the Afar

Edward Saïd, the Palestinian-American scholar who spent much of his life advocating that a new understanding of the Middle East is needed, may have been correct when he wrote about the dissonance between the Middle East and West. Saïd spoke about a "struggle of ideas" that is "complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings (Saïd 1994)". While Saïd was successful in convincing many that the Middle East should be observed using a post-colonial lens, with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict at its core, but he was wrong in his understanding of the dynamics within the region. The Middle East appears to have advanced in a different route that appears largely invisible to Western analysts and Western scholarship.

In a recent survey conducted by the new Middle East Scholars Barometer, Shibley Telhami and Marc Lynch asked 1293 political science scholars with expertise in the Middle East about various regional issues. Unsurprisingly, the survey opened with three questions about Israel–Palestine, reflecting the well-established mental bias of seeing the region through the prism of Palestinian justice. Nearly 60% of respondents described the current Israeli–Palestinian condition as "akin to apartheid", and another 17% said it is going to be "akin to apartheid". Regarding Iran, 67% claimed that US interests are best served by an "immediate return to the JCPOA before addressing other issues (Telhami and Lynch 2021)". Such scholarly opinions which influence foreign policy are utilizing a Western outlook in their moral vision of the Middle East. This approach, we contend, appears counterintuitive to an understanding of the emerging political reality in the Middle East. As we have shown before, region's order of priorities is simply different.

Currently, in the Middle East, textbooks are being re-written in places such as Morocco (Shamir 2020) and Saudi Arabia (Farouk and Brown 2020), and recent studies demonstrate a shift toward "worldliness" in Qatar, a toning down of antisemitism and a certain endorsement of Israel in Saudi Arabia (Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) 2021). The Palestinian issue finds itself on the periphery of this agenda, as was stated recently by Saudi Prince Bandar in a long interview dedicated to the Palestinian issue: "we are at a stage in which rather than being concerned with how to face the Israeli challenges in order to serve the Palestinian cause, we have to pay attention to our national security and interests (Hilton and Elkatouri 2020)".

Granted, this new Middle Eastern order is not supported by all in the Middle East—and perhaps, even less so, in the corridors of Western academia. However, it is gaining strength among a new post-Arab-Spring-generation that still hopes to see a change and a renaissance rather than another wave of resistance and violence.

We contend that the above description supports our hypothesis on the formation of a new paradigm—and even a new "sacred dogma" that will continue to make an impact on the region. Its "sacred" dimension derives less from theology and more from the attempt

to sanctify the ideas of tolerance, anti-radicalization, and economic prosperity as the key for a better future. These ideas are presented with clear dogmas and practices—and, also, as a clear alternative to Islamism. While the old dogmas of the region have not yet passed away—as the last decade of turmoil had shown—we believe that new dogmas are gaining traction among a generation of youth who are less ideological, more individualistic, and more afraid of the price of the old wars that came again to life in the region. The combination of a new paradigm—adopted and backed by several important players in the Gulf—along with the ripeness of some of these ideas among the new generation in the region—is what drives the dynamics described in this essay. While these new voices are not yet winning the battle for hearts and minds, we contend that they begin to set the tone and, certainly, that they participate in this fight—the struggle for a new paradigm in the Middle East.

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