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# Political Polarization in the Middle East

## *Introduction:*

*The Middle East region has been known since the aftermath of World War II, as it witnessed a political birth of a different kind. Arab armies engaged in a series of military coups, and the movement for national liberation extended to include countries and emirates in the Arab region. The old colonization in its traditional form, represented by British, French, or even Italian military forces began to fade away due to the developments of that era. This was evident in the emerging concept of the void theory in the Middle East, according to the principle of Eisenhower, named after the late American president. At that time, there was, in my estimation, an unjustified polarization between the countries close to the Soviet Union back then and the countries with close ties to the United States on the other side. Consequently, international polarization began to impose itself on the Arab region within the framework of the Greater Middle East.*

During the Cold War era, many waves flowed over the years, and the Arab-Israeli conflict began to escalate. It entered a new phase highlighted by the wars of 1956, 1967, leading to the October 1973 war. The Middle East appeared as a focal point of conflict in this region of the world, prompting some world powers to intervene through some Arab countries' gates. This intervention led to chaos and disturbances in almost every country. Although Britain and France were collecting the remnants of old colonialism to leave the region, Israel managed to remain in the American sphere of influence. Washington transformed into Israel's primary patron after Britain and France. The 1967 war significantly bolstered and enhanced Israel's global and regional position. The following years after that setback were challenging for the Arab world, especially for the countries that were occupied, such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The post-defeat period witnessed a tough phase for the Arab world, especially for the countries whose territories were occupied: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The era of attrition warfare emerged, in which the Egyptian

side surfaced triumphantly, breaking free from the setback. Unprecedented Arab solidarity led by the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, supported by the late Saudi ruler King Faisal, culminated in the victory of October. Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal, breached the Israeli Bar-Lev Line, and a new scene unfolded, highlighting **the role of the American diplomat Henry Kissinger.**

**Kissinger once said to the late President Sadat, "The loser doesn't set the conditions... You have to wage a war of movement at least to make your words have a natural impact on the other side."**

The October victory was a natural outcome of this sentiment that embodied the Arab mindset, pushing for a different approach in dealing with the United States and the former Soviet Union. President Sadat expelled Soviet experts from Egypt, declaring that 99% of the variables for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict were now in the hands of the United States. This move diminished international polarization between the Soviet Union supporters and those

traditionally aligned with the United States, tilting the balance in favor of the West over the East.

In this context of historical backgrounds and a noticeable decline in national projects, the Islamic project, initially sponsored by Sadat, progressed without realizing its dangerous consequences. The power of the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood group took root and largely dominated the street in several Arab countries, especially in the country where the group was born, Egypt. Things could have continued in this manner until a tragic event occurred with the Islamic revolution in Iran. The Shah was overthrown, and Khomeini returned to Tehran, where he was welcomed. ***It was said that, on the plane that transported him from France to Mehrabad Airport, Khomeini mentioned to some of his companions that the Arabs had ruled the Islamic nation for several centuries, just as the Ottoman Turks had ruled for several more centuries. He believed it was now time for the Persians to lead the Islamic nation.***

This sentiment was echoed by one of his Iranian aides a few years ago when San'aa fell into the hands of the Houthis. This Iranian official tweeted that the fourth Arab capital had fallen to them after Damascus, Beirut, and Baghdad. This situation has presented a new scene of international polarization in the region, with Iran's emergence, political ambitions, and territorial aspirations driving it to seek hegemony over neighboring Arab and Islamic countries. Iran has enlisted proxies to influence the region's policies and security, notably Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah has encapsulated Lebanese will in the South, engaging in the 2006 war against Israel and finding a significant role within Lebanese state policies. This has led Lebanon to remain without a president for several years, falling under the dominance of a party that is considered an Iranian entity on Arab soil. Regardless of justifications in this regard, the current state of polarization appears clearer than ever in the Middle East today. The region is divided between Iran's allies on one side and those opposing its policies on the other. The same applies to Turkey, which is gaining new positions every day, in addition to being a member of NATO and a country with a unique Eurasian status.

It is worth mentioning that since the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the entire region has been in a state of constant unrest, as if everyone is standing on hot coals. The new Iranian regime, led by the mullahs, adopted what they called

the "leading role of the Iranian Islamic Revolution" in the region. Tehran began playing a prominent role in Western Asia and the Arab Mashreq, and its influence grew, aided by the propaganda campaign led by the leaders of that revolution in various arenas. Iran gained significant proxies, with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon at the forefront, followed by the Ansar al-Islam militias led by the Houthi group, which managed to establish a foothold on the regional stage. This was accompanied by growing strongholds in Iraq and Syria. As a result, Iran's influence spread across the Arab and Islamic map, while the Palestinian cause remained a target for both Arab and regional parties. The clashes in the region continued to follow fixed patterns of advance and retreat, accompanied by a fierce media war and mutual accusations between the two sides, each claiming to act for stability and peace. However, all evidence points to the fact that the Palestinian cause has been sidelined, and that temporary slogans have been driving the currents in the Middle East. Iran at one point mistakenly believed it was the official representative of the Middle East and its peoples, the voice of Islam, and the divine envoy tasked with restoring the glories of the righteous predecessors and establishing a major Islamic state under which all military or civilian Islamic organizations and factions would unite. This belief went even further, as Iran began to view Israel as the primary target for all those who opposed Islam and rejected the Arab unity that would place the region in a much better position than it currently finds itself in. If we analyze the events since the beginning of the Iranian invasion of the region's skies with drones and missiles, we can draw several conclusions, which most observers who closely follow the events would likely agree upon. They understand that "most fires begin with a spark," and I will summarize these results regarding the symbolic Iranian actions in the following points:

**First:** Iran, unknowingly, threw Benjamin Netanyahu a lifeline and truly gave him a "breath of life." While Netanyahu had been seeking to remain in power as long as possible, the events that unfolded gave him a justification to continue his aggressive policies, even allowing him to be more arrogant in confronting the Palestinians and intensifying their suffering and starvation.

**Second:** Iran has proven that its focus is on the "Iranian file" and not the Palestinian issue. This is evident from the fact that Iran embarked on this



adventure—coordinated and approved by the United States—only after Israel carried out a deadly airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Syria. Notably, Tehran did not act earlier to alleviate the Israeli occupation's aggression against the Palestinians. The response came only when Iranian territory—specifically the Iranian diplomatic compound—was targeted by an airstrike days before, prompting direct confrontation between Iran and Israel.

**Third:** Iran has always reacted to Israel's actions through its proxies in alternative theaters, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, or some militias loyal to Iran in Syria and Iraq. However, we did not see a genuine desire from Iran to enter the battlefield until its direct Iranian positions were persistently targeted by military action. Therefore, we must point out that what occurred represents a significant shift in the dynamics of the Iran-Israel conflict. Tehran, even if only symbolically, attempted to strike directly at Israel's core. I believe this is the first time that Israel's core has been subjected to a direct military attack, even though it did not achieve complete success.

In conclusion, the Iranian-Israeli confrontation this time is unprecedented. It offers a new reading of future confrontations in the region, particularly the potential for regular warfare between the armies of both states, without relying on proxies or non-state actors that Iran had depended on in the past.

**Fourth:** We must sadly and regretfully acknowledge that whatever Iran's justifications may have been, its actions have shifted the balance of power and diverted attention away from the tragedy of the Palestinian people and the catastrophe they are enduring, along with the looming new Nakba on the horizon. As a result, the news of the Iranian military operation against Israel became the lead story, overshadowing the troubling developments and concerning preparations for a potential Israeli invasion of Rafah and the consequences this might have on the agreed-upon rules of the game. Unfortunately, this shift has occurred at a time when the Palestinian cause had garnered significant sympathy from the general public in various countries around the world. However, Iran's actions are likely to lead to a decline in that support and the return of European policies to their previous stance of full support for Israel, motivated by the military action that took place.

**Fifth:** There is no doubt that Iran's actions, taken without coordination with the Arab or Palestinian side, clearly indicate that the Iranian agenda operates independently. It is advancing according to a purely Persian concept, in which the Palestinian cause is merely one mechanism in a broader confrontation, but not necessarily the primary factor driving the long-standing conflict. Did we not initially agree that the Palestinian issue has often been used as a "scapegoat" by those who wish to conceal their own political agendas behind Palestinian slogans? It is also clear that the recent developments have put several Arab countries, including Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon, in a difficult position. Their responses are now divided between concerns for the situation in Gaza and the broader Palestinian territories and the possibility of a full-scale regional war in the Middle East, given the new circumstances and the unforeseen risks that have emerged.

**Sixth:** These recent events have led to possible outcomes that cannot be ruled out, starting with the potential success of the West in designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization. Particularly as condemnation of Iran has become widespread, and Iran has placed itself in this predicament, allowing international propaganda to unleash an unprecedented wave of criticism against it. Furthermore, it is likely that this situation could lead to a setback in negotiations between Tehran and the West regarding Iran's nuclear program, which no longer holds the same importance following these recent events.

A careful reading of the current scene in the Middle East clearly indicates a fluidity in the positions of the various parties involved, suggesting that the narrative is far from complete and may still be in its early stages.

**Finally,** a new phase of conflict in the Middle East has begun, transitioning from proxy battles and multiple arenas, which may eventually lead to direct confrontation between the main parties, with a reduction in the role of certain proxies due to recent developments. The undeniable loser in all of this is the Palestinian people, who continue to pay the highest price in our contemporary history, through the blood of their children, women, and elderly.

Today, the Arabs stand on the other side, watching the bloody aggression against the Palestinian people while exerting media and political efforts to navigate this impasse. However, the polarized conditions

that have taken hold of the Arab region prevent any meaningful resolution. In conclusion, we must note two key observations:

**First:** The fluidity of regional and international relations suggests that everything is complex, and the situation has not yet stabilized. However, the matter changes if we realize that the politics of this region, which lies at the heart of the world, seem to be floating above the hot sands, and the narrative is far from complete. We are still in a state of anticipation, making it difficult to predict the future or solve the puzzles of what is to come. Political forecasting is fraught with risks, especially in light of the rapid changes brought about by the Arab-Israeli conflict since October 7, 2023.

**Second:** The Middle Eastern sentiment oscillates between waves of optimism and pessimism, caused by the lack of clarity in vision. Despite this, the

public in most countries around the world is stirred with strong emotions supporting the Palestinian people and sympathizing with the suffering of the people of Gaza. Additionally, there have been official shifts in the positions of several countries that have started to realize that the Arab-Israeli conflict will remain a ticking time bomb unless we can defuse it by granting the Palestinians their rights to an independent state, which is the minimum they demand. Only then can the Palestinian people have a status and entity that allows them to engage in dialogue with the Israeli state and coexist with it. The issue is complex and highly sensitive, with historical, religious, and human dimensions that require a great deal of mutual understanding and awareness, enabling us to recognize that we are all in the same boat.

**Conclusion:**

*The polarization we are witnessing today between the Iranian and Israeli camps requires the Arabs to be more vigilant and have a deeper understanding of the nature of international relations within their regional framework and its ramifications for the entire region. The Arab world is heading towards massive changes—not just in the structures of regimes, but in the essence of policies. Moreover, relations between Israel and the Arab countries are entering a new phase, which may push the possibilities of an Israeli policy becoming more flexible, no longer held hostage by the Israeli far right alone.*





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### Abstract:

After the end of World War II, many changes occurred in the Middle East region, the most important of which were the national liberation movements that included many countries. Colonialism in its old form represented by military forces began to leave the region, and international polarization began to impose itself on the Arab region within the framework of the concept of the Greater Middle East. This requires Arabs to be more vigilant and have a deeper understanding of the nature of international relations within their regional framework and their repercussions on the region, in light of the major changes in the structures of systems and in the essence of policies.

**Keywords:** Political polarization, Middle East.

## الاستقطاب السياسى فى الشرق الأوسط

■ د/ مصطفى الفقى

الكاتب والمفكر السياسى، مساعد أول وزير الخارجية الأسبق

### المستخلص :

بعد انتهاء الحرب العالمية الثانية حدثت تغيرات كثيرة فى منطقة الشرق الأوسط، وأهمها حركات التحرر الوطنى التى شملت دولا كثيرة، وبدأ الاستعمار فى شكله القديم المتمثل فى قوات عسكرية يرحل عن المنطقة، وبدأ الاستقطاب الدولى يفرض نفسه على المنطقة العربية فى إطار مفهوم الشرق الأوسط الكبير، وذلك يستلزم من العرب يقظة أشد وفهماً أعمق لطبيعة العلاقات الدولية فى إطارها الإقليمى وانعكاساتها على المنطقة، فى ظل التغيرات الكبيرة فى هياكل النظم وفى جوهر السياسات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية :** الاستقطاب السياسى، الشرق الأوسط.