THE STRATEGIC CHESSBOARD OF THE MIDDLE EAST
INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is a highly important and a very complicated region. Strategical chess games are played at different levels – parallel matches:

1.) **Great power rivalry**: challenging the American hegemony (the rise of China and Russia).

2.) **Regional power play**: defining the emerging regional order (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia + Egypt).

3.) **On the ground level**: civil wars (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen).

>>> The presentation will focus on these chess boards – with the following questions:

What are their basic characteristics? Who are the movers and shakers? What are their motivations and relations?
Arab and Islamic world – common characteristics: language, culture, history + contemporary economical, social, and political challenges.

On the other hand it is a complex (diverse) region – ethnicities, religions, tribes >>> the importance of the transnational identities.

Deep social-cultural (ethnic and religious) cleavages: Arabs vs. Persians, Turks vs. Kurds, Shi’ites vs. Sunnis.

The different mixes of religion, ethnicity, and language in each country explain their internal instability and external struggles for power.

They also describe the limits of any effort to create a stable pattern of Iranian influence, Pan-Arab influence, or any form of regional stability.

Furthermore, they clarify why the strategic map of the Middle East has produced so much tension, conflict, and change over time.
THE MIDDLE EAST
ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS COMPLEXITY
THE MIDDLE EASTERN „CHESSBOARD”
MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

**Important** region, in the focus („crossroad”) of international relations from ancient time to the modern era (the influence and presence of foreign actors).

**Relations** between the states of the region are dominated by **suspicion**, conflict, and latent (or sometimes overt) **confrontation**.

**Old animosities** and **distrust** since rivalries are central in the political narratives and legitimacy formulas: **Saudi Arabia** vs. **Iran**, **Egypt** vs. **Turkey**.

**No regional integration** and **power hierarchy**, **constant rivalry** between different dynasties and powers (therefore the region is highly militarized).


>>> There are many players, and they play tough matches...

More active regional players – more aware local actors, beside the great powers, actually, the states are playing the leading role (more active foreign policy).

More complex games – too many actors-players, beside the states, there are other important (sub- or supranational) players (e.g. tribes, ethnic and religious groups).

More security problems – there are plenty of conflicts, also new challenges are arising (e.g. demographic pressures, failed governments, climate changes, etc.).

+ A new kind of fight: previous fights were country and regime specific, the emerging confrontation is over the nature and future of the region’s societies.

>>> A larger power struggle has emerged, which is reshaping the strategic landscape of the („Changing”) Middle East...
The Middle East  Key players & notable relationships

Roll over to see relationships Click to find out more
Click background to come back

predominantly predominant

NATION Group SUNNI SHIA Non-Muslim

HATE (enemies) STRAINED (complicated) GOOD (trade with) LOVE (allies)
The main political rifts in the Middle East
Who openly backs whom

Source: The Economist
GREAT POWER RIVALRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST
USA, RUSSIA, CHINA

Historical rivalry (between colonial powers), Cold War rivalry (between superpowers), currently new international rivalry („challenging the American hegemony”).

U.S. is still leading – as regional actor, with the constant aim: blocking the rise of any hegemon in the region, plus other strategic motivations (bilateral relations).

Russia is coming back – in order to counterbalance the West (USA&EU), to obtain economic and diplomatic gains, to manage the internal (Islamic) problem.

China is buying up – influence via economical-financial relations, multipolar intentions, and tries to manage the internal (Islamic) problem too.

Beside weakening (destroying) the Islamic State, their interests differ sharply (+ the local actors are playing them off against each other).

Conflict zones, where the great powers collide: Syria, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, (Iran), etc.

>>> A new great game in the Middle East...
GREAT POWER RIVALRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

USA, RUSSIA, CHINA
DIMENSIONS OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST
WHO ARE THE MAIN ACTORS?

Military power (and reach) is significant, but there are other dimensions of power, which are highly important in the Middle Eastern chess game:

Demography – the size of the population (80 million countries: Egypt, Iran, Turkey).
Geography – the strategical location of the countries (Egypt, Iran, Turkey).
Economy – the success of the economic models (Turkey, Gulf monarchies).
Technology – the rate of innovation (know how in practical context).
Diplomatic relations – the importance of the alliances (American „umbrella”).
Informal relations – the use of transnational networks (culture, religion, ethnicity).
Soft power – the use of other tools, like communication (Qatar’s Al-Jazeera).

>>> The leading regional powers: Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, (Egypt), (Israel).
HARD POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST
THE REGIONAL MILITARY BALANCE

THE 15 MOST POWERFUL MILITARIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East is undoubtedly one of the world’s least predictable regions. To make sense of the ongoing conflicts, we have compiled key elements that comprise the 15 strongest militaries in the Middle East according to a ranking published by Global Firepower. Quality of equipment, training, and professionalism of each military is not taken into account.

LEBANON
- Total armed forces: 55,100
- Tanks: 315
- Combat aircraft: 7

SYRIA
- Total armed forces: 320,000
- Tanks: 4,600
- Combat aircraft: 661

ISRAEL
- Total armed forces: 175,000
- Tanks: 4,300
- Combat aircraft: 611

PALESTINIAN AUTONOMOUS AREAS OF GAZA AND JERICHO
- Paramilitary: 35,000

EGYPT
- Total armed forces: 450,000
- Tanks: 3,700
- Combat aircraft: 710

IRAN
- Total armed forces: 540,000
- Tanks: 1,400
- Combat aircraft: 307

IRAQ
- Total armed forces: 429,000
- Tanks: 2,700
- Combat aircraft: Only 55% serviceability

JORDAN
- Total armed forces: 104,050
- Tanks: 1,217
- Combat aircraft: 109

YEMEN
- Total armed forces: 66,300
- Tanks: 1,320
- Combat aircraft: 57
- Paramilitary: 70,000

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

Business Insider
REGIONAL MOVERS AND SHAKERS
IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA, TURKEY

Rivalries are fueled by the historical past (wistfulness for former Persian, Ottoman, Arabic empires), the regional process (vacuum in Syraq), and the internal situation.

Iran – less revolutionary, more realistic, regional aspirations, actively present, tries to preserve the status quo, to secure its position in the region.

Saudi Arabia – less conservative, statist, more active foreign policy, financial, technological, diplomatic, and military support in order to gain positions.

Turkey – new foreign policy, Middle Eastern orientation, regional aspirations and activism, leading the revolution, with Turkish soft power.

(+ Egypt – is week, but could be an important player in the future again.)
(+ Israel – is silent, but powerful player in the region.)

>>> More active players, more diverse foreign policies, and wider practices...
REGIONAL RIVALRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, EU, France, Germany, Lebanon, Palestinian State, Kuwait, USA, China, Jordan, Iraq, Russia, UK, Israel, Yemen, Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Gaza Strip, Muslim Brotherhood, Syrian "rebels"
Serious and old rivals for influence in the Middle East. They have different religions, relations, models, and motivations.

Clash of the conservativist-traditionalist and the radical-revolutionary Islam? Or clash of geopolitics?

Classic power play: who will guard and lead the Gulf region? (E.g. the name dispute: Persian or Arabian Gulf?)

After the Arab Spring new concerns and possibilities. Different visions, positions, and reactions. Both are motivated by security considerations.

Battlegrounds: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan, etc. (+ rivalry in the OPEC).

>>> They are important players at the chess table, however, the regional game is more complex...
REGIONAL RIVALRIES
IRAN VS. SAUDI ARABIA
THE NEW FACE OFF
TRANSFORMATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST?

Two groups of countries and political forces:

– **Islamists** (Iran, Qatar, Turkey, Muslim Brotherhood): conviction that political Islam is the sole framework for governing.

– **Traditionalists** (Saudi Arabia, Gulf monarchies + Egypt, Jordan, Israel): favoring a more gradual, managed, and cautious evolution of the existing order.

The struggle will be determined by many factors:

– The future of **important states** (Egypt, Algeria, etc.): position and influence?

– The management of the **internal problems** (succession, reform, etc.): stability?

– The **chaos of the Middle East** (Jordan, Lebanon, etc.): new battlegrounds?

  + **Other factors**: globalization & socioeconomic turbulence!

>>> Who can adjust to these social, political, and economic waves?
In Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen the foreign patrons are important, but the local and/or transnational non-state actors are significant players too.

- The rise and creation of the Islamic State;
- Al-Qaeda franchise in the Middle East (al-Nusra);
- Religious organizations (Hezbollah, Muslim Brotherhood);
- Religious militias (Badr Brigade, Islamic Army);
- Important ethnic-religious groups (the Kurds, the Houthis);
- Rebel-opposition groups (Free Syrian Army);
- Tribes, tribal networks (Deraa, Hasaka, Raqqa).

>>> The uncertain players complicate the game even more...
GROUND LEVEL

IMPORTANT NON-STATE ACTORS
**CONCLUSION**

**FUTURE PROSPECTS**

*Whether* the regional system has been destroyed with the implosion of the Arab world and the proliferation of political vacuums in the Middle East?

*Yes*, the state system has been hollowed out by the civil wars and the inroads made by the Islamic State, which challenges the whole concept of regional order.

*No*, the notion of a regional system itself has not been destroyed, the main regional players are acting within the framework of current order (state borders).

*New regional order is emerging out of the conflicts, where the important players are Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, (Egypt).*

They are **projecting significant influence** into the region, and **have the potential to form a more positive system** that takes on the regional problems.

*Rather*, the question is, **how** these four countries **will (inter)act in the future**...
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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