



# **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**?

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Map Scale: 1:1,800,333.9

300 miles

300 kilometers

• National Capitals

• Selected Major Cities

Major Transportation Routes

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Scale = 1:1,900,000  
 Projection = Lambert Conformal  
 1st Standard Parallel = 46.051 2nd Standard Parallel = 45.08  
 Central Meridian = 45.300 Origin Latitude = 32.50  
 False Easting = 1300000 False Northing = 1164200  
 World Geodetic System 1984

Topographic Data : Shuttle Radar Topography Mission 2000  
 Vegetation and shaded relief information - Natural Scenic Design  
 Water - NOAA Hydrographic Imaging Spectroradiometer  
 Digital Line Graphs : Digital Chart of the World  
 Map construction and editing : Cartav  
 Computer system : Macintosh Dual 3.3 GHz PowerPC

# THE MIDDLE EAST

## ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS COMPLEXITY

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.

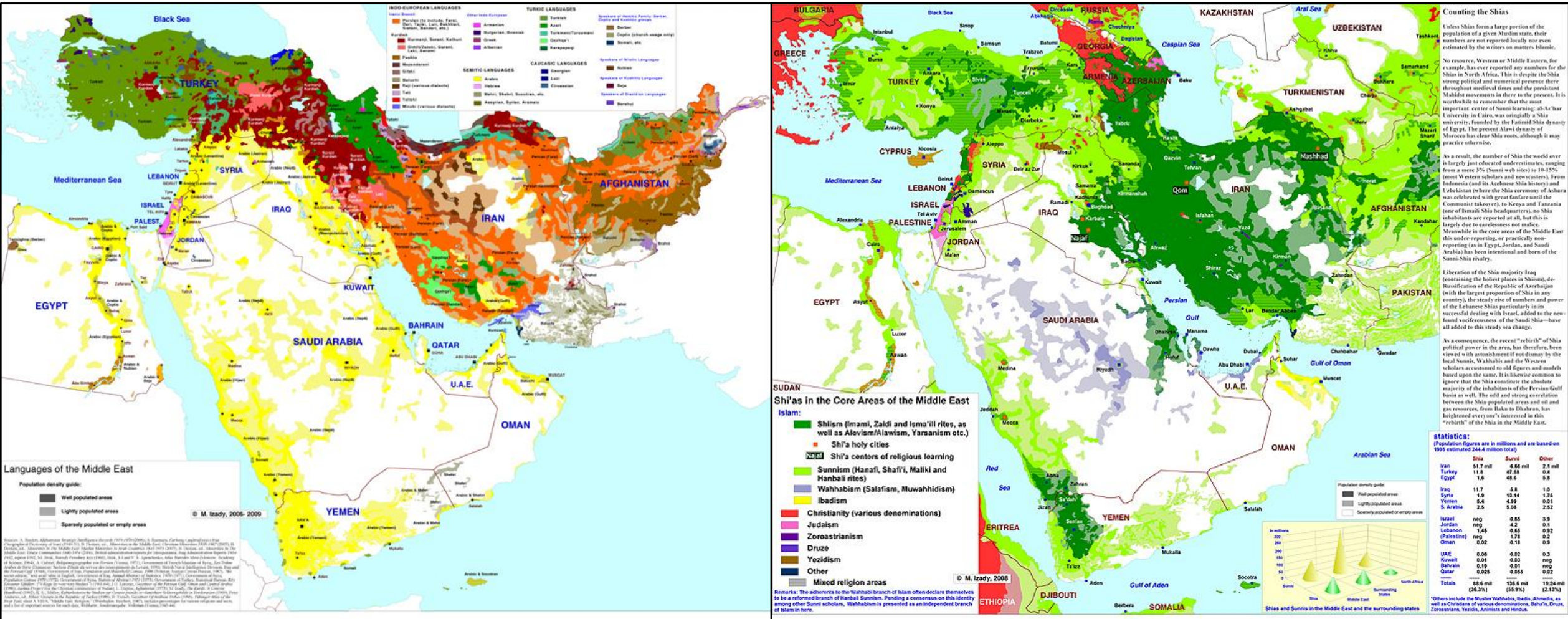
**The different mixes** of religion, ethnicity, and language in each country **explain** their **internal instability** and **external struggles for power**.

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**.

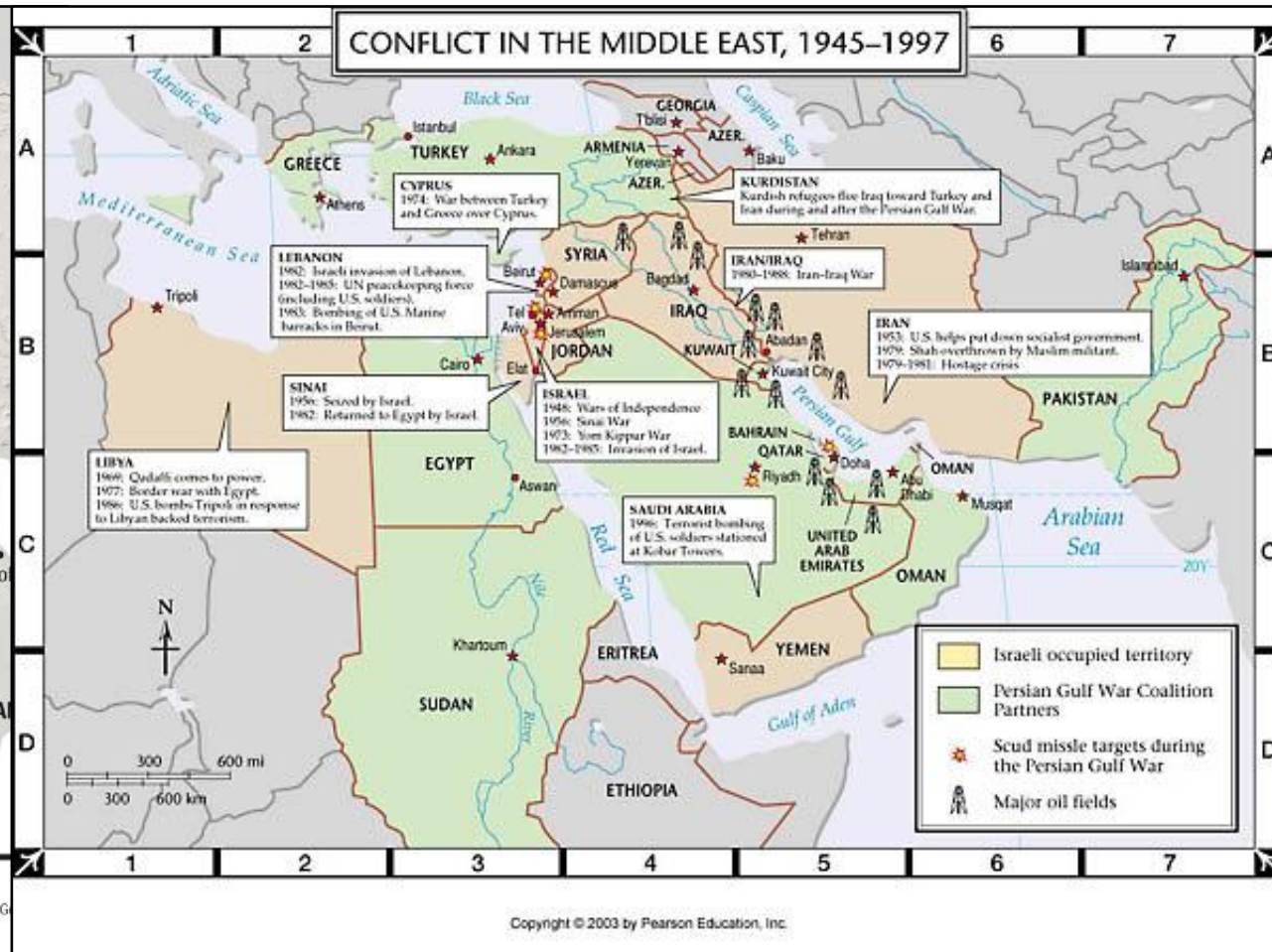
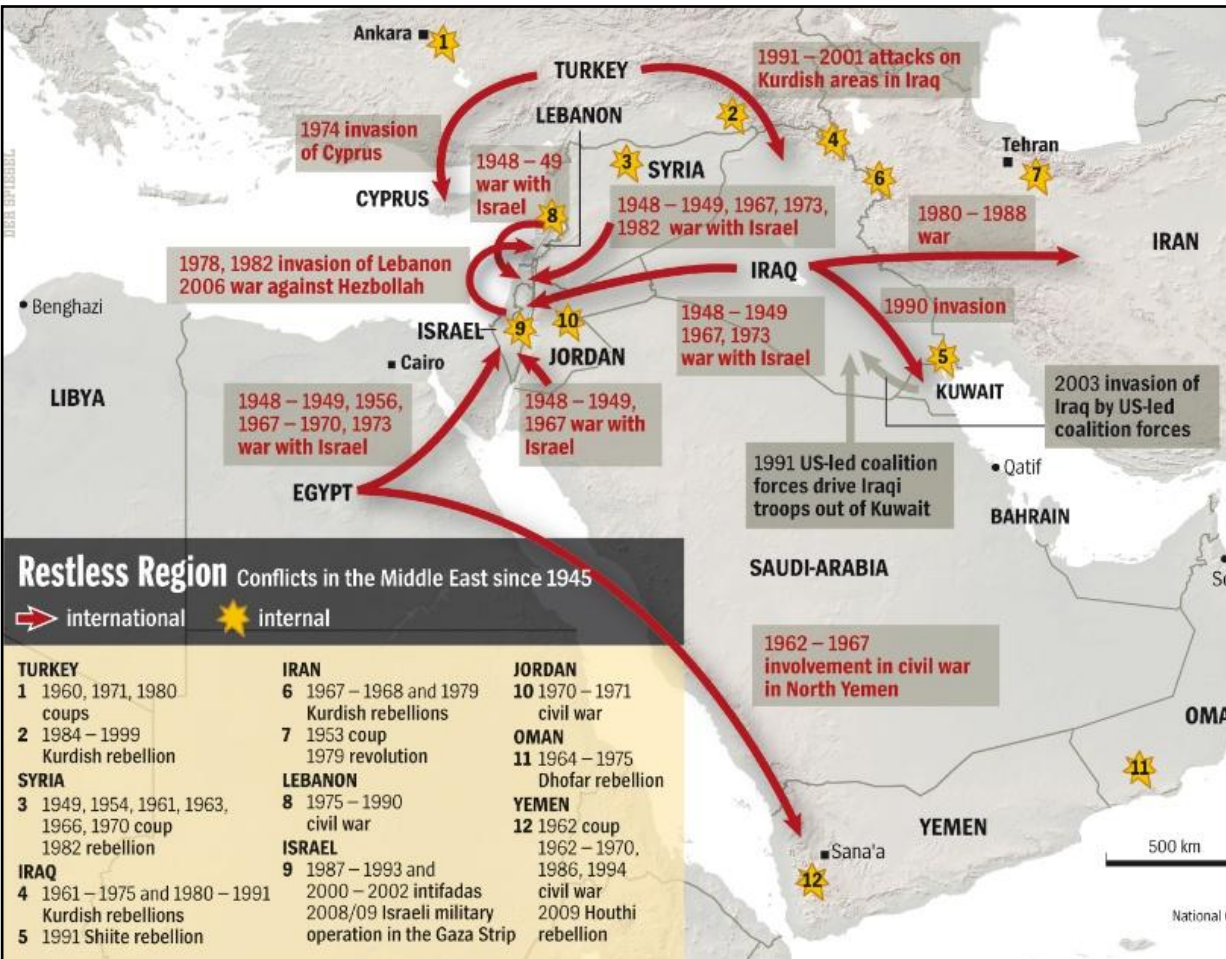
**No regional integration** and **power hierarchy**, **constant rivalry** between different dynasties and powers (therefore the region is highly militarized).

**The Middle East has seen regional hegemons come and go**: 1952: Egypt's era, 1970-1973: Rise of the Gulf, 1990-1995: Israel's moment, 2003: Iran on the rise, 2011: New face off.

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

# THE MIDDLE EAST

## HISTORY OF REGIONAL CONFLICTS



# NEW (DIS)ORDER OF THE MIDDLE EAST

## NEW PATTERNS AND TRENDS

„New” Middle East was proclaimed in various occasions: 1918 / 1945 / 1967 / 1973 / 1979 / 1991 / 2001 / 2011 – **Why today’s Middle East is different?**

**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.).

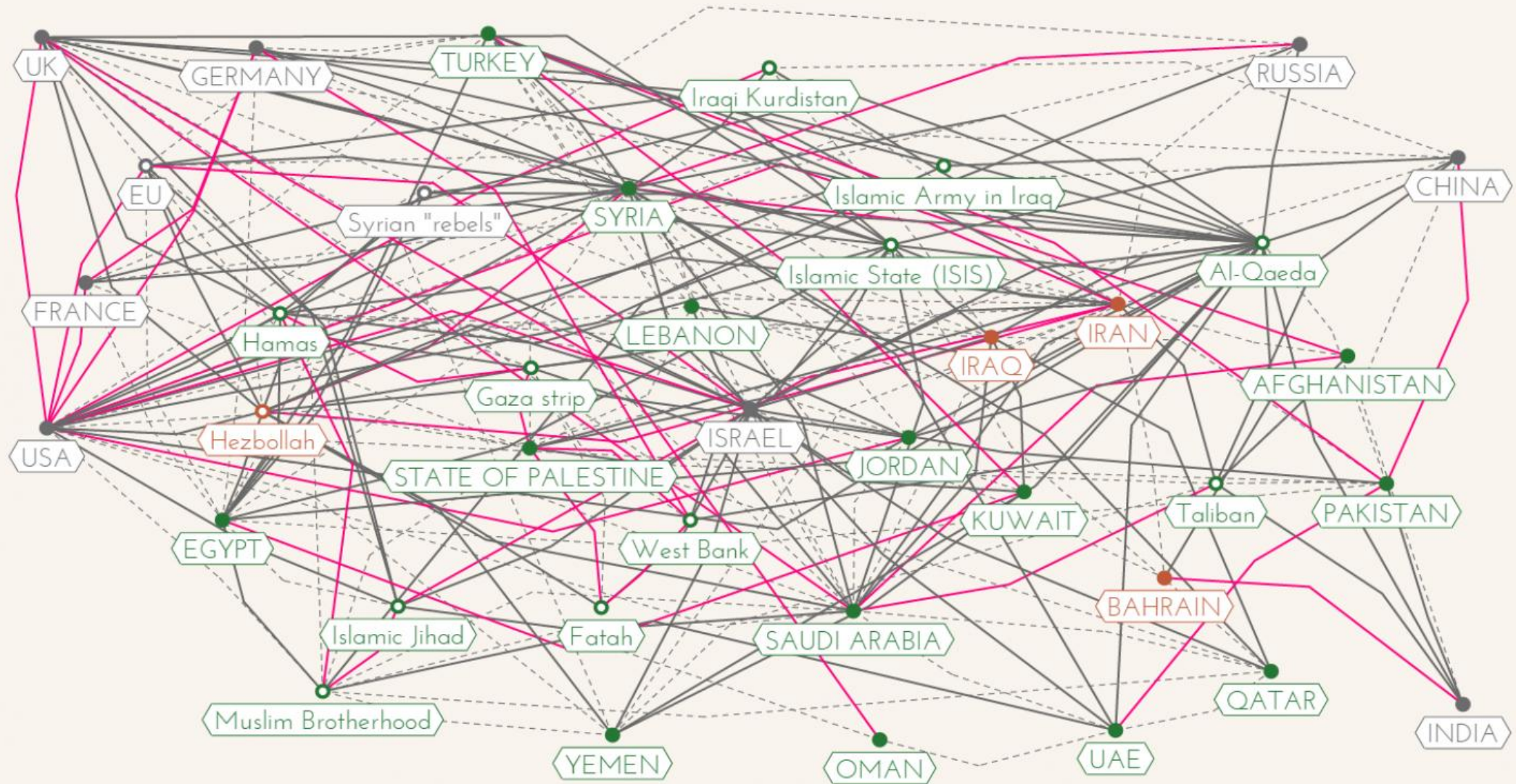
+ **A new kind of fight**: previous fights were country and regime specific, the emerging confrontation is over the nature and future of the region’s societies.

>>> **A larger power struggle has emerged, which is reshaping the strategic landscape of the („Changing”) Middle East...**

# The Middle East

Key players & notable relationships

toggle fullscreen



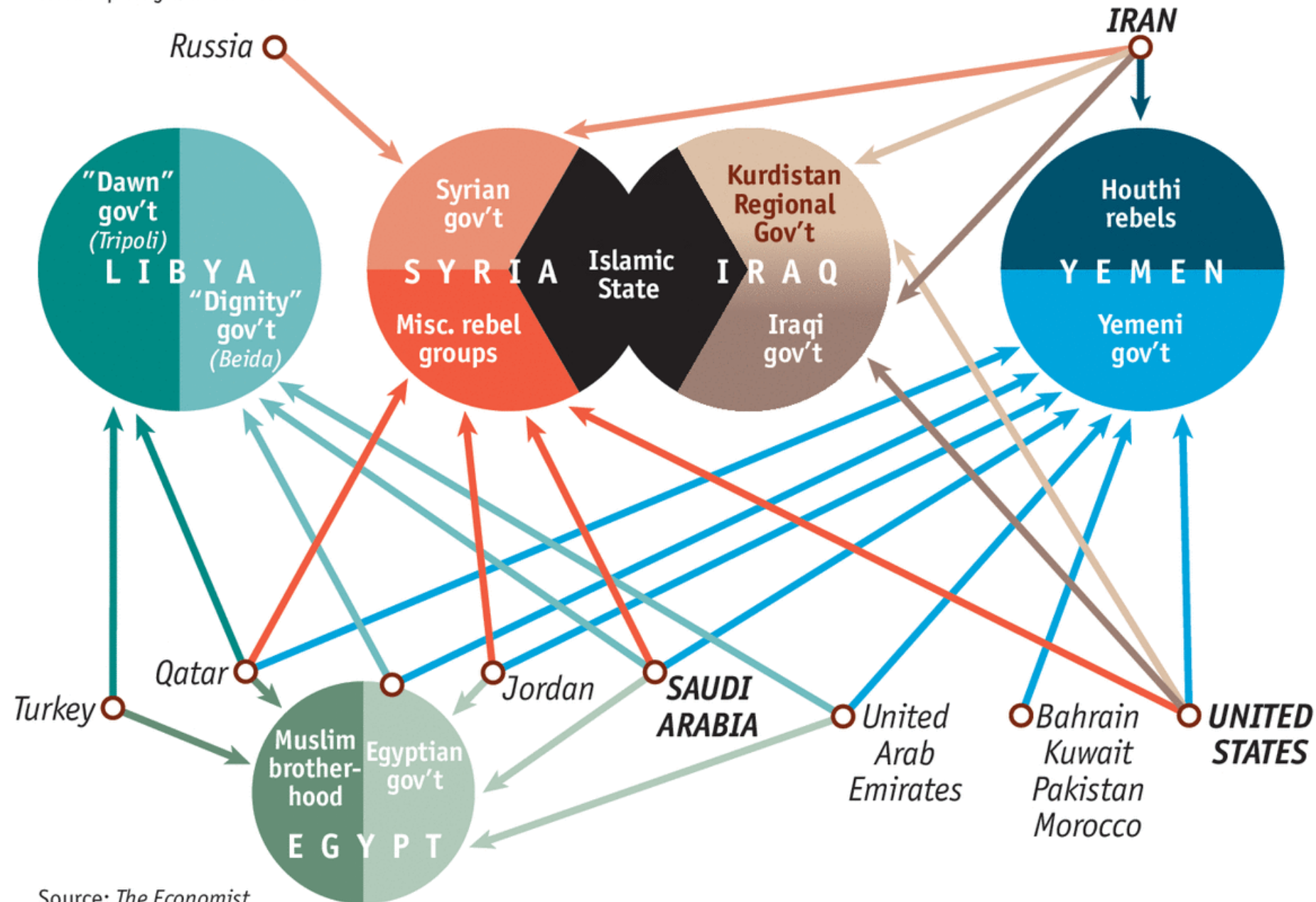
Roll over to see relationships  
Click to find out more  
Click background to come back

predominantly  
NATION Group SUNNI SHIA Non-Muslim

FILTER RELATIONSHIPS  
HATE (enemies) STRAINED (complicated) GOOD (trade etc) 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*”).

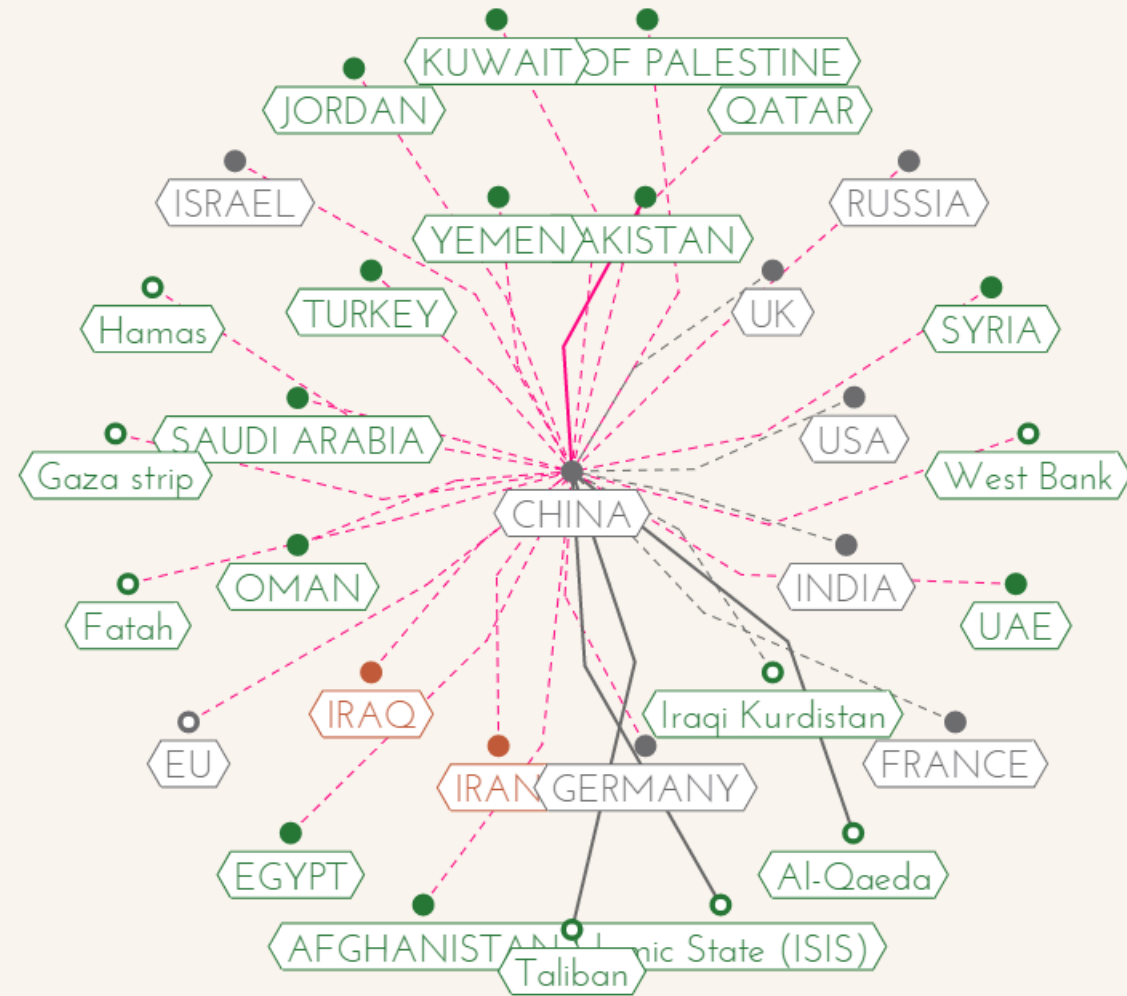
**U.S. is still leading** – as regional actor, with the constant aim: blocking the rise of any hegemon in the region, plus other strategic motivations (bilateral relations).

**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...**



# **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.

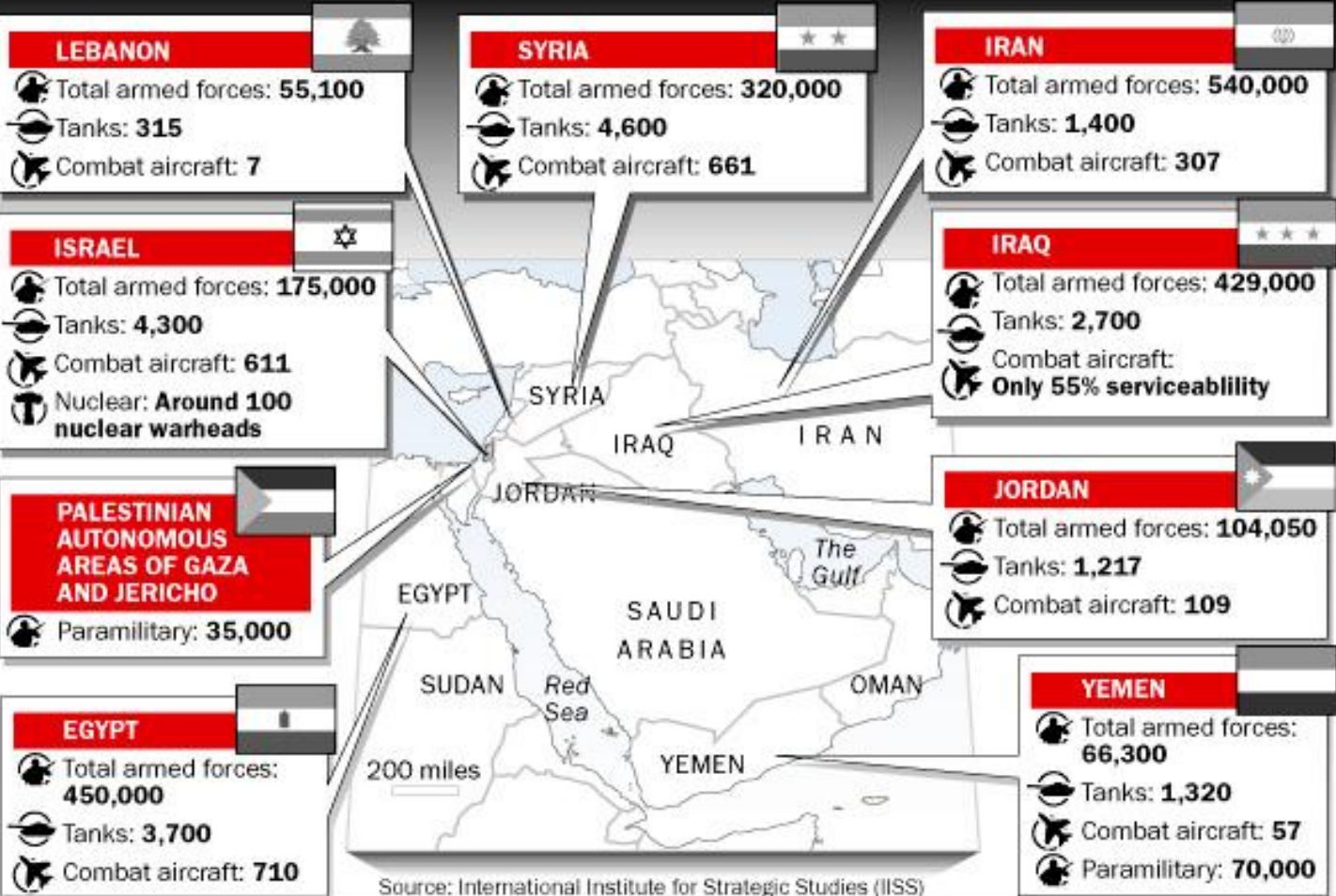
■ = Middle East leader

COUNTRY	OVERALL RANKING	ACTIVE PERSONNEL	TANKS	AIRCRAFT	NUCLEAR WARHEADS	SUBMARINES	BUDGET
TURKEY	1	410,500	3,657	989	0	14	\$18,185,000,000
ISRAEL	2	176,500	3,870	680	80-200	14	\$15,000,000,000
EGYPT	3	468,500	4,767	1,100	0	4	\$4,400,000,000
IRAN	4	545,000	2,409	481	0	31	\$6,300,000,000
SAUDI ARABIA	5	233,500	1,095	652	0	0	\$56,725,000,000
SYRIA	6	178,000	4,950	473	0	0	\$1,872,000,000
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	7	65,000	545	444	0	0	\$14,375,000,000
YEMEN	8	66,700	1,260	181	0	0	\$1,440,000,000
JORDAN	9	110,700	1,321	246	0	0	\$1,500,000,000
IRAQ	10	271,500	357	212	0	0	\$6,055,000,000
OMAN	11	72,000	215	101	0	0	\$6,715,000,000
KUWAIT	12	15,500	368	101	0	0	\$5,200,000,000
BAHRAIN	13	13,000	180	105	0	0	\$730,000,000
QATAR	14	11,800	90	72	0	0	\$1,930,000,000
LEBANON	15	131,100	318	57	0	0	\$1,735,000,000

Sources: Global Firepower, The Center For Arms Control And Non-Proliferation

BUSINESS INSIDER

### THE BALANCE OF MILITARY POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST



# REGIONAL MOVERS AND SHAKERS

## IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA, TURKEY

Rivalries are fueled by the **historical past** (nostalgia for former Persian, Ottoman, Arabic empires), the **regional process** (vacuum in Syria), 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.

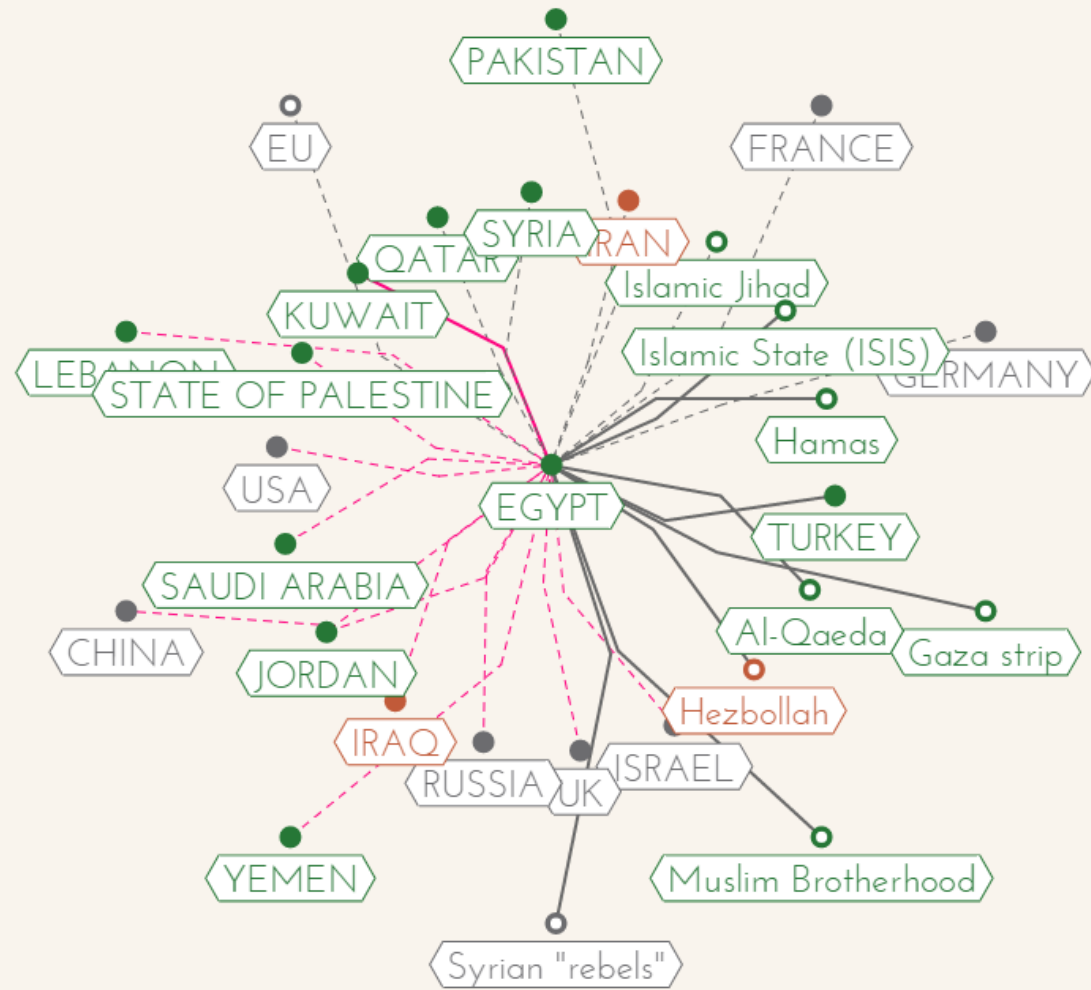
**Saudi Arabia** – less conservative, statist, more active foreign policy, financial, technological, diplomatic, and military support in order to gain positions.

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

(+ **Egypt** – is weak, 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

## IRAN VS. SAUDI ARABIA

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?)

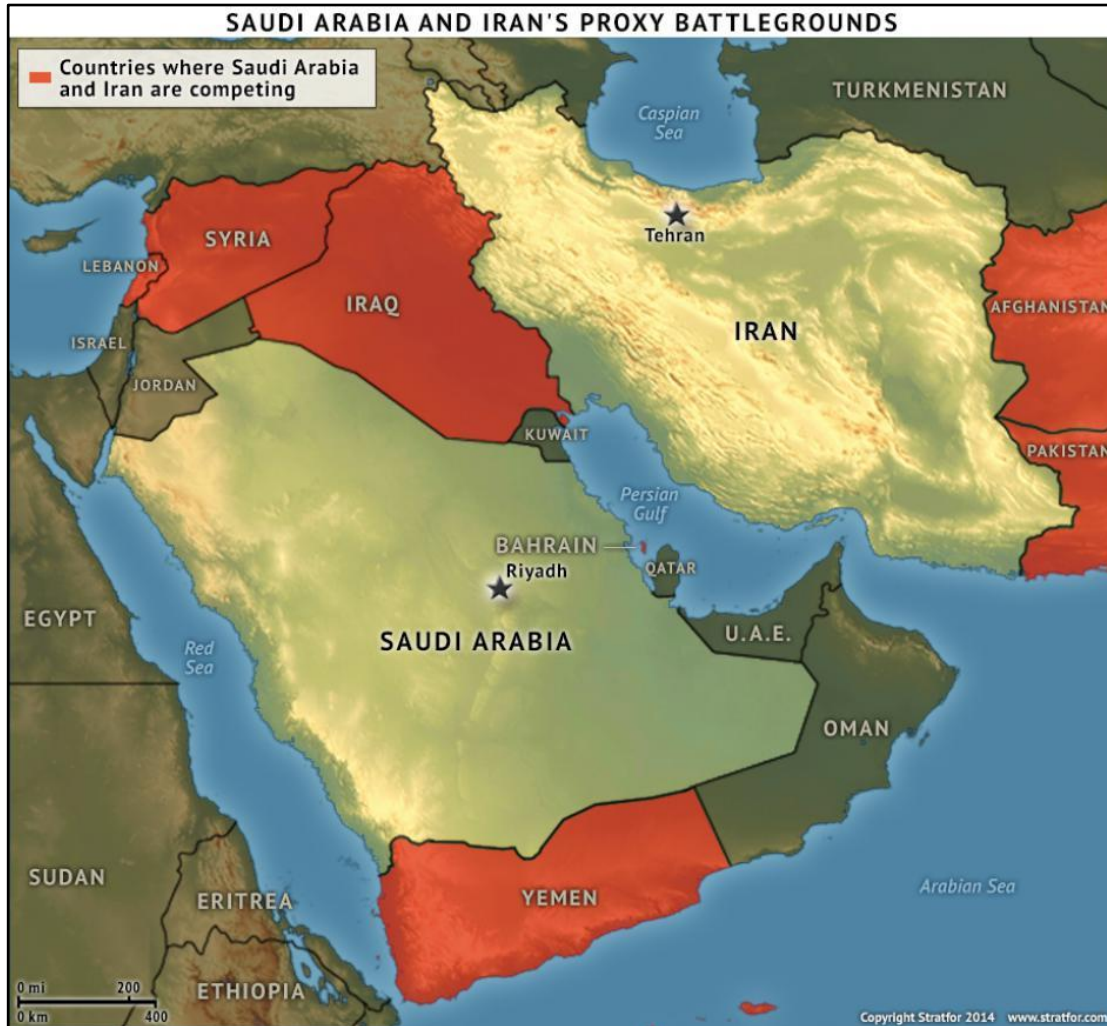
After the **Arab Spring** new **concerns** and **possibilities**. Different visions, positions, and reactions. Both are motivated by security considerations.

**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!

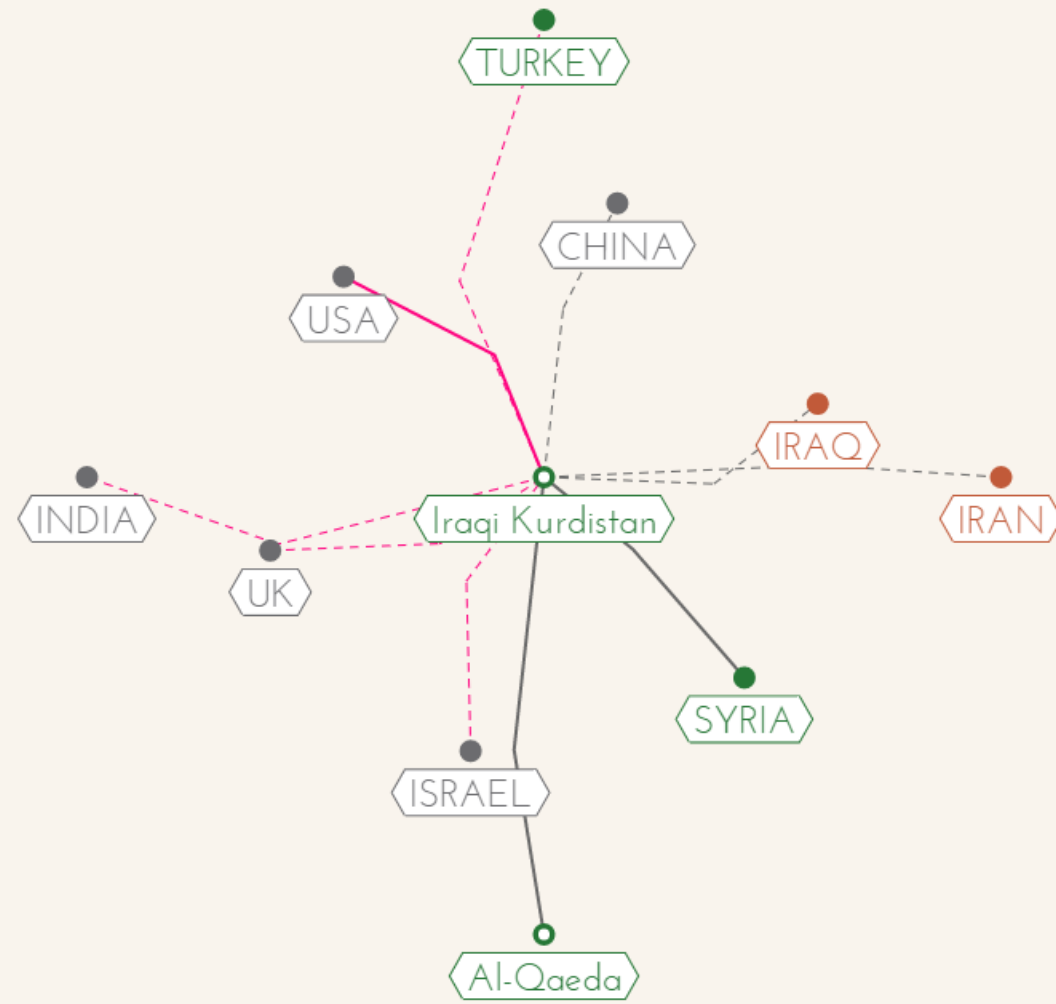
>>> Who can adjust to these social, political, and economic waves?

# GROUND LEVEL

## IMPORTANT NON-STATE ACTORS

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...



# 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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**SZOLNOK – 2015**