



**Middle East
Research Institute**

www.meri-k.org

Policy Brief

20 December, 2016. Vol. 3, No.24

The Future of the Middle East

Dlawaer Ala'Aldeen*

The Middle East is still in flux and will remain so for some time, it will possibly be another decade before the ultimate power balance is reached. Policy makers of Iraq and the KRI who wish to pursue paths of their own design, must look carefully at the trends in power dynamics and the policies of the global and regional powers before designing their strategies.

Very few people could have predicted the catastrophic end of the decades old Middle East Order (MEO), which outlasted the major shifts in global power dynamics. The region, considered the cradle of civilisation and a vital source of global energy, is now riddled with security, political and economic crises, with never-ending conflicts, destructive wars and population displacements. The weak, dysfunctional or failing states of the Middle East (ME) are struggling to cope with growing nationalist, religious, and sectarian extremism. The question is, where is the ME heading and what are the local actors' position on this path? The answer can be found through an examination of the evolution of the power dynamics in the ME, which is likely to determine the next MEO.

The Old Middle East Order

After the First World War, [the British and French divided the ME](#) and established numerous small and medium size client states as a way of securing their interests in the region. In this process, they laid the foundation of a MEO, which remained in place until after the Second World War and the start of the Cold War when the United States (US) and Soviet Union dominated the scene and established a bi-polar world order. Numerous coups and revolutions ignited the region, several monarchies were toppled by Arab nationalist regimes, or in the case of Iran by a new Islamic Republic. There were border disputes and protracted wars, such as the Israeli-Arab and Iraq-Iran wars. Despite these shifts and drifts, the post-colonial borders between states remained rigidly intact.

The Transition

The Cold War MEO should have collapsed with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, akin to Eastern Europe, but it remained fixed. The Iraq invasion of 2003 was supposed to trigger change, but the wave [started from](#)

* President, The Middle East Research Institute, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

[Tunisia in 2010](#). During the so-called 'Arab Spring' numerous global, regional and local powers became active and intertwined but a stable equilibrium was not yet established.

Globally

After 1989, the **US** became the only superpower that could have filled the gap left by the Soviets. However, short termism and swings in foreign policies adopted by the alternating Republican and Democratic administrations rendered the US unable to pursue a course to reshape the ME. The George W. Bush administration did however adopt a long-term neoconservative approach to design a new MEO, but the Obama administration reversed the trend by distancing itself from the ME while accepting the influence of other powers in region.

The forthcoming Donald Trump administration [remains unpredictable](#) in terms of its ME policy. Trump's abstract foreign policy sentiments and preferences at times appear to be irreconcilable. He seems to prefer an [amicable relationship with Russia](#), and supports Israel as well as the strongmen of Turkey and Egypt, but unreservedly goes against Iran, which is one of Russia's strongest allies.

Russia had a troubled couple of decades after 1989, but it has [now re-emerged](#) as a significant power and returned to the Middle East via Iran and the Assad Regime in Syria. Russia is actively investing in other bilateral relations with Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Yemen and even Saudi Arabia and thus it could be argued that it will have an increasing influence over shaping the new MEO.

Regionally

Iran, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has emerged as *the* [most influential](#) regional power in the ME. It is the only regional power that appears to have a clear strategy which it executes hands-on with utter determination. It has now overwhelmed the decision-making processes in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. Iran does have its limitations and difficulties, but is well placed to challenge other rivals in the neighbourhood and shape the future.

Turkey has long had internal problems and was growing increasingly weak, until its fortunes were revived by the current ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) when they came into power in 2002. Turkey fast became a [formidable regional economic power](#) with significant geopolitical strengths. However, it has been increasingly entangled in [internal conflicts, polarisation and power struggles](#) which have negatively impacted on its policies abroad. Therefore, in the long term, Turkey has the potential to both ascend and decline as a regional power. Nonetheless, due to its geostrategic position, Turkey will always have a role in shaping events, at least across its southern borders.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries have collectively gained a significant role, mainly through their wealth, Arab identity and Sunni affiliation. Although they remain highly dependent on the US for their ultimate protection, they will continue to influence events across ME and North Africa.

Locally

There are numerous local (state, sub-state and non-state) actors that are increasingly influential in the regional power dynamics and must be factored into predictions about the future MEO.

Local **State** (or national) actors, such as Iraq, have been weakened by wars, internal fragmentation and external interventions, but have the potential to grow increasingly independent and act as important actors transcending from the local to the regional power plays.

Sub-state actors, such as the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, have a formal or constitutional status within their states but have acted as independent powers with their own international alliances. These may

aspire to become sovereign or acquire greater sovereignty within their states, and as such will play a part in shaping events.

Non-state actors include a broad spectrum of local entities, which are now inextricably linked (as proxies or allies) to other actors. They range from those that have acquired social and political legitimacy inside their countries, such as the Shia militias of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Libya; and those that are considered illegitimate radicals or terrorists, such as Al-Qaida and Al-Nusra. All these non-state actors are able to act independently to influence events and shift power balances, but also act as proxies for larger regional powers.

The New Middle East Order and the Change of Borders

During the transitional phase and emergence of a new MEO, internal boundaries between communities may change within conflict zones, but external borders are much less likely to alter. There are of course many ethnic or religious communities in the ME with statehood aspirations, however, with the exception of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), statehood gains in the near future are not likely. Whereas struggles for independence may continue for some time for those who do not settle for greater devolution of power within existing states.

In Conclusion

The Middle East is still in flux and will remain so for some time, it will possibly be another decade before the ultimate power balance is reached. Thereafter, conflicts and rivalries may continue, but will become more predictable and manageable, allowing for a steady flow of trade and politics.

Policy makers of Iraq and the KRI who wish to pursue paths of their own design, must look carefully at the trends in power dynamics and the policies of the global and regional powers before designing their strategies. They will inevitably find themselves needing to engage, and at times align themselves, with various regional and global powers, they should avoid being drawn into the giants' rivalries. They are not in a position to change the balances of power and would come out stronger if they remain relatively neutral.

Weak states, such as Iraq (that have in effect lost their sovereignty to external powers) and sub-states, such as the KRI (that are aspiring to gain ultimate sovereignty), must pay even more attention to the threats posed by the rivalry of regional and global giants, as well as the dangers of growing non-state actors who are capable of undermining state institutions. Para-militaries and radical groups, legitimate or not, can overwhelm weak states and drive them to ultimate failure.

To survive the transitional phase, the leaders of Iraq and the KRI must invest a great deal more in the institutionalisation of the governing system. They can become stronger, proactive and enhance their own capabilities to shape events to their best interest if they remain focussed on good governance, rule-of-law and inclusiveness.

Article Citation: Ala'Aldeen, D. (2016) The Future of the Middle East, MERI Policy Brief. vol. 3, no. 24.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of MERI.