

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia Middle Power Studies Network (FPCI-MPSN) held a virtual public discussion titled '**Mapping Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle-East**' on 27th March 2024.

(Rewatch via bit.ly/mpsnme)

The panelists included:



Prof. Burhanettin Duran, General Coordinator of SETA Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research



Dr. Paul Salem, President and CEO of Middle East Institute (MEI)



Moderated by:

Dr. Irine Hiraswari Gayatri, Coordinator of the Political Economy and Strategic Issues Cluster, Center for Political Research, BRIN

1. According to the panelists, the middle powers in the Middle East are Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, UAE, and to a certain degree, Qatar. Egypt is seen to have declined in power due to its acute economic crisis.

2. The rise of middle powers in the Middle East are related to their internal developments: (1) The countries have witnessed decades of state-building progress – from Egypt, to Saudi, Türkiye, Iran – they are now much more robust. (2) They have developed strong economies: Türkiye, UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Iran despite sanctions. (3) The rise of leaders with strong personality: Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, UAE's President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Saudi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud.

3. Coinciding with the increasing presence of China, the returning presence of Russia, and the decline of US influence in the Middle East, countries in the region are looking to have more space, global options, global leverage, and bargaining power by diversifying their partnership, especially by developing deep economic relations with China and other Asian countries. That is the new reality of the Middle East and the global order.

4. Despite a certain degree of strategic autonomy, most of the Middle East middle powers' strategic partnership remains with the US as they do not have any other strategic option in terms of security.

5. There is little possibility for any country in the region to be a regional leader, but at the same time: (1) Some countries agree on regional principles: respect for national borders, respect for sovereignty, and looking for win-win economic solutions. The major exceptions are Israel and Iran; (2) Some countries have a greater say in the regional order in the Middle East, such as Türkiye, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

6. There is no regional order in the Middle East and the region is "strategically chaotic". The four major recent normalization processes among countries in the region are not yet in such a position that they would bring some established order. These normalization among others included: (1) Türkiye with some Gulf countries, (2) Israel with some Arab countries, (3) Saudi Arabia and Iran, and (4) Qatar with some Gulf countries. There are major differences among interests in terms of national security interests, yet there is no platform like what we see in Southeast Asia or Europe where countries manage conflicts and build common interests. The Middle Eastern countries are cognizant that there should be an order in the region and that this order could not and may not be imposed by other global powers like the US, China, or Russia. As on the contrary, the great powers' involvement in the region is producing some conflicts at the expense of the regional powers.

9. The US interests and policy in the Middle East have been marked by the continuity from one administration to the next: (1) The US will keep its naval armed forces in the Gulf to continue having control over global energy, particularly as China rises and gets half of its energy from the Gulf; (2) The US wants to keep trade routes open: the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Suez Canal; (3) The US wants to keep the US\$ as the global currency. This significantly depends on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries to continue selling oil in US\$. With that, the US is able to impose economic pressure against Iran. (4) The US has an interest to counter terrorist groups, reflected in the US presence in Syria, Iraq; and their attention on Yemen and North Africa.

10. Türkiye's active diplomacy and foreign policy reflects Türkiye's ambition to be a significant regional player with global and interregional impact. This is beyond being a regional power, but not a global power or a hegemon as it is beyond Türkiye's capacity.

11. The region's long-term economy remains a big concern as its biggest revenue, oil and gas, will be on the decline in the next decades. Middle power countries such as Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Egypt, and UAE are setting their paths to economic diversification by targeting more investment. Realizing peace, stability, and security thus is key to enabling that.

I. The Rise of Middle Powers in the Middle East and the Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy

“When we look at the Middle East and the rise of the middle powers, one dynamic is the decades of state building that has happened since basically the 1960s to the present day. If we go back to the middle of the 20th century, most Middle East countries were very new states. They did not have strong institutions. Many had been through colonial times or foreign occupation. So there is the process of state building that we have seen in different trajectories from Egypt, to Saudi, to Türkiye, to Iran. They are now much more robust states compared to where they were a few decades ago.”

“Many of these countries have also developed strong economies. Again, Türkiye is an example, of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia for different reasons; Iran has built a strong economy despite sanctions. That economic strength gives them some independence of motion and movement.” - **Dr. Paul Salem**

“There is another lesson that we need economic development and prosperity for the regional countries, especially for the Gulf countries. The revenue and wealth coming from oil or gas hydrocarbons will be on the decline in the next decades. So there is a need for something to have some prosperity for their citizens in the future, that is economic development. Then you need peace, stability, and security to do that. You have to attract investment. Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Egypt, UAE are all on the same path to achieve that goal.” - **Prof. Burhanettin Duran**

“The rise of leaders. President Erdoğan in Türkiye is a strong personality, a strong leader; The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, a strong leader; and President of UAE. Leadership matters. I think these leaders are charting a course for their own countries in a globalized economy which is multipolar and they are then able to become powers that make their own decisions and are not dependent on global powers.” - **Dr. Paul Salem**

“They are basing their strategic autonomy perspectives on the realities of the regional issues, regional realities, but also on the perception of the new coming world order. The international system is becoming more and more chaotic because of many reasons. This has started or has deepened by the Coronavirus pandemic, and later the war in Ukraine, and the great power rivalry. All of these issues are dominating the agenda of middle power. That is a necessity on the part of the middle powers to follow much more independent policies, either diversification of the policies or trying to combine different relationships at the same time.” - **Prof. Burhanettin Duran**

“We need to distinguish between countries that can have strategic autonomy. Those are the middle powers and there are only five of them, which I would say are Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel; UAE, and Qatar in a small way. Many of the other countries of the region, the smaller ones, do not have strategic autonomy, including the country which used to be the biggest and with the most strategic autonomy in the past, which is Egypt, which I would argue no longer has strategic autonomy because of its acute economic needs.”

Then you have small countries which are falling under the sway of Iranian power, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, which do not have strategic autonomy. So it is a mixed bag.”

“The strategic autonomy is limited by the realpolitik and ‘realekonomik’ needs of those countries. Türkiye has its needs, Saudi Arabia has needs, and so on. In the Gulf countries, I would say, despite a bit of strategic autonomy, their strategic partnership remains with the US. They do not have any other strategic option in terms of security. However, they have deep economic relations with China and with other Asian countries, despite the US not being happy about that. So the countries have some measure of strategic autonomy, but they have to make decisions about their limited resources and what they can get and what they need.” - **Dr. Paul Salem**

“Middle powers are not just in the Middle East. Middle powers in terms of rising powers are becoming more influential in shaping global politics. I should mention Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and some of South African countries. These are some of the rising powers and they are contributing to the global economy and global stability at the same time.

In this new atmosphere of the international system, there is such a reality and necessity for doing that. For the middle powers in the Middle East like Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, you have to contribute to global issues as well. You cannot limit yourself to the Middle East, because the problems and the solutions are so much interlinked. The regions are so much integrated.” - **Prof. Burhanettin Duran**

II. Leadership in the Middle East

“There is no place for a regional leader. But there are some countries which agree on regional principles. The principles would be respect for national borders, respect for sovereignty, and looking for win-win economic solutions. Even Israel agrees on those principles except for the Palestinians.

That means Israel is not ready to be part of an agreement on principles. The second big player that does not agree with these principles is Iran. Iran does not agree to respect national borders, does not agree to respect the sovereignty, does not agree to the principle that a state should control military force within its borders, does not agree to the principle that you should not interfere in other countries’ business through armed forces like they have in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Iran is the biggest player which does not agree with the principle of the Middle East which has sovereign nation-states, where states respect each other and they respect international rule of law. Türkiye, the Gulf countries, Egypt, and Israel partially respect the international rule of law, but not Iran. And that is why this is particularly going to take a very long time.” - **Dr. Paul Salem**

“The term regional leader could be something misleading. Because we cannot mention any country in the Middle East as a regional hegemon or as a regional leader. There is no such capacity in any other country in the region. There are some significant players like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt despite the recent political and economic weakness of this country, it is a major country in the Middle East, and also Israel.

You will see that there is no possibility for any country in the region that could be a regional leader. But at the same time, some countries have a greater say in shaping the regional order in the Middle East. We can mention them as Türkiye, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. They can contribute to the establishment of a new order by initiating some bilateral and trilateral cooperations, and some initiatives to bring peace, and resolution to the conflicts. This is not an easy issue and not an easy goal to be attained.” - **Prof. Burhanettin Duran**

III. The Great Powers Presence in the Middle East

“The position of the US was very determining their position, because the current security architecture in the Middle East is still fragile. Without the US, the regional US traditional allies are not able to continue preserving their securities. This creates tension but at the same time, a search for cooperation, for example, the rapprochement with Türkiye and mending the ties, even going beyond normalization and going to strategic relationship in terms of bilateral relations, simply because of this reality. Saudi Arabia and UAE are improving their relations with Türkiye to provide stability and security for themselves because of the vacuum that is left by the US.”

“The impact and involvement of the global powers are not bringing peace, cooperation, and stability to the region. And then, regional powers should search for their stability and security. That is the major lesson learned from all the involvement of the US, Russia, and possibly China in the region.”

“During the Cold War, both the Soviet Union and the United States were very dominant and much stronger than the states in the region. The Soviets had their clients, the Americans had their clients. The Soviet Union has disappeared and for a decade or two, the US really was dominant but for many reasons has declined. So that gives more space to the countries of the region to make their own decisions. This coincides with the rise of China and the resurgence of Russia (in the region). That gives countries in the region global options, global leverage, and bargaining power.”

“Some traditional US allies in the Middle East are having good relations with China and Russia at the same time. I believe that is because of the new realities of the Middle East and the global order.”

“For China, it is so much related to trade and economy issues, but still as a broker for the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, China is becoming more important in regional affairs.” - **Prof. Burhanettin Duran**

“The US interests and policy in the Middle East have much more continuity from one administration to the next than dramatic change. First, the US will always remain, and keep its naval armed forces in the Gulf because it wants to continue to control global energy, particularly as China rises and gets half of its energy from the Gulf. The US does not want to leave the Gulf energy to come under the control of China or to come under the control of Iran. That does not change from one administration to the next.

Second, the US has an interest in keeping trade routes open: the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Suez Canal. That does not change from one administration to the next.

Third, the US has an interest in keeping the US dollar as the global currency. That depends on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries to continue selling their oil in US dollars. Through that, it can impose economic sanctions and maximum pressure against Iran.

Fourth, the US has an interest in countering terrorist groups, which is why many of its special forces remain in the region, and why they are still in Syria and Iraq. They keep an eye on Yemen and North Africa. In addition, there is the Iranian nuclear threat. Every administration takes this very seriously. So I would say there is a lot of continuity.”

“If Donald Trump wins the presidency, he would be more pro-Israeli or more pro-right-wing Israeli than President Biden. Already his advisors are talking about that Israel should annex the West Bank, and that Israel should kick Palestinians out of Gaza.”

“So, a Trump administration would be a bit more unpredictable, a bit more bellicose, with Iran. Donald Trump wants to make America great again. It is all about America and America's interests. He is not interested in defending Israel or defending Saudi Arabia or defending any of them. He is only interested in defending the US. He will hit back if he is hit, but do not expect the Trump administration to have much interest in the Middle East or to have any major strategy for the Middle East. Trump is famously against regional engagements, multilateralism, and alliances. He is a tough guy, he has told Iran when he was president, ‘if you hit anything, any American, or any American base, or kill any American soldier, I will react’. But if under Trump, Iran attacks Saudi Arabia or UAE, or Iran and its proxies attack Israel, he would not do anything. That is not his priority.” - **Dr. Paul Salem**

IV. Is There a Regional Order in the Middle East?

“A point I will make is that the Middle East, generally, as a region, you might call it strategically chaotic. There is no regional order. No system for the countries of the region. These middle powers – Israel, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Iran, UAE and Qatar, if you want to list the main ones – there is no place where they meet. There is no place like ASEAN, where they try to manage conflict or to build common interests, and that is something that the region definitely needs at some point.”

“On the pathway to a regional order, it is the case that that is still very far in the future. But what we have seen is regional de-escalation and that is very important and very good.

We have seen important de-escalation between the Gulf countries and Iran, that is good news for Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon. We have seen de-escalation between Türkiye and the Gulf, Türkiye and Egypt, which is very good news as well for both Türkiye and the countries in the region. We have seen de-escalation between a number of Arab countries and Israel, the Abrahamic Accord. So de-escalation has been happening.” - **Dr. Paul Salem**

“In terms of international organizations and conflict management, there are many things to be done in the Middle East, because we do not have a regional integration like Southeast Asia or European countries. In the Middle East there’s the GCC, We can talk about the Arab League and OIC, but these are not similar to regionalism seen in Asia and in Europe.

For the future, we have this prospect for middle powers in the Middle East to realize that they need this kind of integration effort, not just to cooperate or to further their economic interests, but also to have security architecture, a strong resilient security architecture for the future of the region. But I am not sure whether we are in that phase. Still, it seems that there could be some fluctuations in terms of developing good relations with some countries.”

“It is true to say that there is no established regional order in the region. This is simply because of the capacities of the middle powers. There are major differences among interests in terms of national security interests.

Now it seems that there is a surge for maximizing national interests on the side of middle powers. But at the same time, they are very cognizant of this and there should be an order. This order could not be and should not be and may not be imposed by other global powers like the US, China, or Russia. Even on the contrary, their involvement in the region is producing some conflicts at the expense of the regional powers.” - **Prof. Burhanettin Duran**

V. Relations among Middle East countries

“There have been four processes of normalization just after the new US President Biden came to office. The one between Türkiye and Gulf countries, Israel and Arab countries, Qatar and other Gulf countries, and Iran and Saudi Arabia. All of them were out of the reality, out of recognition that there is a ‘new Middle East’. I know that it is not something to say concretely when you refer to the ‘new Middle East’, because we are accustomed to speak so much about the emerging new Middle East after October 7th, but it is a reality at the same time.”

“We are not in such a position that these rapprochements, normalization processes, would not bring some established order. I see that there is such a search for that and all regional countries on one side are using this power vacuum for their own interest. But at the same time, they are trying to have bilateral and trilateral cooperation and some kind of regionalism. Maybe it is too early to say that, but all actors are realizing this necessity.”

“So in the last three or four years, all regional actors have modified their position on the side of Saudi Arabia and UAE, on the problems that they saw in Yemen and the success of Iranian proxies in endangering their securities.”

“Türkiye, Egypt, and Gulf countries are on the side of stability supporters, to find security through stability, keeping the sovereignty issues, and fighting terrorism issues. But unless this lesson is shared by all powers in the Middle East, we cannot have a successful peaceful conflict resolution. This is an unfortunate conclusion. Iran's profile in the region is also a serious issue that is not settled. The position of Israel also is not settled in spite of all the rapprochement with the Arab countries. The Palestinian issue is just one side of it, but also the competition, the rivalry, or any possibility of conflict between Israel and Iran, is also a major concern to the region.” - **Prof. Burhanettin Duran**

“Saudi Arabia came under daily missile and drone and artillery attack from the Houthis in Yemen, backed by Iran and the UAE was made to understand very clearly that if there was any major conflict, Iran could immediately destroy Dubai and Abu Dhabi in a matter of hours, and the UAE and Saudi Arabia realized that the US cannot or will not be able to effectively protect them from Iran or Iran's militias. So they had to do what you call as ‘sue for peace’. In other words, find a way to de-escalate with Iran, stabilize the situation in Yemen, stop their direct hostility against each other in order to protect themselves from Iran and Iran's proxy militias. Iran, on the other hand, got some access to the UAE, with Iran obviously being under a lot of economic and political isolation. So each party got something from it.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are definitely not in any way friends or partners (with Iran), but they are no longer at war. It is a de-escalation, you notice that even in the six months of war between Israel and the Palestinians, where the Houthis have been blocking shipping in the Red Sea, Iranian backed militias have been attacking US forces in the Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been safe, have been calm, and that I think is good for them. That is pretty much the extent of the nature of that relationship for now.

Iran remains not a place where the UAE or Saudi Arabia could seriously invest. I think in theory, they would be open to it. But there really is no proper investment climate in Iran, not only because of sanctions, but also because of the internal management and conditions of the economy itself. So that is a lost opportunity for Iran, because otherwise I am sure there would be a lot of investment in Iran.” - **Dr. Paul Salem**

VI. Türkiye as a Middle Power in Between Regions

“For Türkiye, it is not just a Middle Eastern country, it is in the middle of some regions that Türkiye belongs to. But at the same time, these regions’ agenda comes to dominate Türkiye. If Russia invades Ukraine, then as Türkiye, you have a major problem. If Russia dominates Black Sea, you have a bigger problem. If anything related to Ukraine spreads to the Balkans in Kosovo and Serbia, as Türkiye, you will have a major problem. So you can add them to many other problems around Türkiye.

So, Türkiye in all of these regions, has an ambition to contribute in terms of stability, security, and economic prosperity. This is not an ambition of leadership. This is not an ambition of being a hegemon. This is an ambition of being diplomatically, in terms of providing security and stability, being much more than a regional power. You have to be interregional. Global power is something superior and beyond Türkiye's capacity. A significant regional player with global and interregional impact– this could be a more preferable term to understand and to explain Türkiye's active diplomacy and ambitious foreign policy.”

“So Türkiye has to create a profile that goes beyond the regional politics, to have a global impact, to have something to say in the global matters. This is so much a reality for Türkiye under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. President Erdoğan criticized the UN system and called for the reforms by saying “the world is bigger than five, also by underlining the problems of many conflicts in the world.”

“It is much easier for Türkiye, as part of the Western alliance, as a member of NATO, to have a greater say in the shaping of these security issues. Türkiye's relations are on the way to be repaired with the US. Turkish President Erdoğan was expected to visit Washington in May. So, these are the terms that you have to deal with. Türkiye is using new hard power and soft power combined to contribute to the stability and security in the surrounding regions.

First, to have some openings to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Second, to contribute to the stability and rule-based surges for the international order. This is a vision of Türkiye, expressed by Erdoğan, as the center of Türkiye and a perspective for having strategic autonomy. I believe that this is not just limited to Türkiye and Middle Eastern powers. For example, Britain is being global. It is the same with the France strategic autonomy surge. So you can have this understanding for Brazil, Malaysia, and Indonesia as well.”

- **Prof. Burhanettin Duran**