

Review of the book by Sara Bazoobandi (2020), The New Regional Order in the Middle East: Changes and Challenges. Cham: Palgrave Mac- millan, pp. 141, ISBN 978-3-030-27885-4

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The author of the book “The New Regional Order in the Middle East: Changes and Challenges” has vast experience in the issues of the Middle East and an excellent understanding of Arabic, Persian and English, the main languages of the region. Sara Bazoobandi is the Managing Director of Middle East Risk Consulting in Germany and a Non-Resident Fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute and the Atlantic Council Global Business Economics Program and Energy Center in Washington, USA. She holds a PhD in Arab and Islamic Studies from Exeter University and her previous works focusing on the region include “Political Economy of the Gulf Sovereign Wealth Funds: A Case Study of Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates” (Bazoobandi, 2012).

The six chapter book is a product of wide and enriching perspectives from authors spread across three continents. The chapters focus on the region’s socio-economic challenges, power and people of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), oil wealth, the GCC’s future and shifts in regional politics, a brief history of the Iran Nuclear Programme and analysis of the regional and global actors under the role of external powers. The main author, Sara Bazoobandi, is responsible for three out of the six chapters, with Neil Quilliam from Chatham House, UK analysing the role of regional and global actors in the two closing chapters. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen from Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, USA provides insights on the shifts in regional politics and the GCC. The book examines the drivers of change in the Middle East region and provides readers with a comprehensive regional outlook which focuses on the political and social events reflected in the socio-economic systems, security and the balance of power across the region. Each

chapter delves deeper into a regional change driver such as the Iran Nuclear deal, the politics and economics of energy, the regional socio-economic challenges, external influence from different powers and the dynamics of regional actors struggling for control and dominance.

Chapter One explores how the social changes such as identities, values, gender and state-citizen relations in the Middle East contribute to political uprisings. It also looks at how the water, food and energy nexus is responsible for environmental challenges in the region. Chapter Two focuses on the nexus between GCC oil wealth and social contracts as well as the management of the oil wealth and the structural reform attempts to diversify the economy which have changed the flow of assets to domestic and regional needs from Sovereign Wealth Funds.

Chapter Three analyses the historical development of the GCC and its economic and security role as a regional organisation. This chapter makes two main arguments; the first is that the Arab Spring that began in Tunisia on 18 December 2010 altered the common threat perception in the region, and secondly that the blockade of Qatar of 5 June 2017 to 5 January 2021 ([Gengler, 2020](#)) changed the dynamics of Gulf security giving rise to multi-polarity of players in the regional security traditionally dominated by the British and the Americans as main security guarantors. Chapter Four is a recap of Iran's nuclear ambitions, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of July 14, 2015 with the UN Security Council's five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) plus one (Germany). The chapter also looks into the impact of the US withdrawal from JCPOA to the domestic politics of Iran, and regional as well as international level dynamics. According to the author, Iran's need for a nuclear weapon is necessitated by the regional balance of power struggle, experiences from the 8 years of war with Iraq from Sep 22, 1980 to Aug 20, 1988 ([Tabaar, 2019](#)), domestic security challenges from resistance groups and its sharing a border with a nuclear Pakistan.

Chapter Five looks into prospects as to whether the political, diplomatic and military role of China in the region will increase following signals from the Obama Presidency (2008-2016) that the US prefers re-assessment of its role as the sole external security provider of the Middle East. The potential of China's growing influence in the region is explained through the country's largest and ambitious international project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The strong signals for a change in the US policy was also replicated by the Trump administration (2017-2021) empowering regional allies like Israel through the Middle East Peace Plan announced at the beginning of 2020 ([Ali, BiBi and Ashraf, 2020](#)). The final chapter brings into perspective how regional powers such as Russia, India, Turkey and Brazil are gaining political and economic influence capable of shaping developments in the region. The chapter also analyses the strategic moves of the regional powers to strengthen relations with the countries in the region.

This book is one of the most authoritative and accurate analyses of the issues of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in recent times. Other articles that also give thoughtful perspectives on the issues of the region include Fawcett's "International Relations of the Middle East" that gives a balanced history of the region, themes, conflicts and issues ([Fawcett, 2019](#)), Stein's latest "International Relations in the Middle East: Hegemonic Strategies and Regional Order" that traces domestic and international foreign policy dynamics to project changes in the regional order ([Stein, 2021](#)) and Amour's "The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East: Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances" which analyses regional inter-state and non-state rivalries and security alliances to help in understanding the regional order in the Gulf Region ([Amour, 2020](#)).

In this publication, the author almost gives an interesting impression of a gendered perspective of the issues of the region when describing the expected stronger political, diplomatic and military relations between China and the region as “muscular” relations (p. vii), as well as Iran’s role (p. 79). In the introduction, Sara Bazoobandi gives an excellent synthesis of the contents of the collections in the book which are covered chapter by chapter by the different authors. The book is systematically organised based on various themes and issues under discussion providing it a good and more natural flow in the organisation despite the fact that it contains the different points of view of the respective authors. The book contributes to the whole topic of regional order in the MENA region by updating existing literature and offering new and unique insights that are worth further scientific inquiry by those interested in the topic.

However, like any other thematic articles, this book is not without inconsistencies. The introduction discusses the role of western powers in the region which, in my view, should have been solely left for the two dedicated chapters in the book on the role of external actors to cover conclusively. The inconsistencies are amplified by the author’s claim that the challenges discussed “have created new opportunities for other global powers such as Russia (...) to gain more influence in shaping the future of the region” (p. 8). The reference to Russia as a global power here is not consistent in the rest of the book, with chapter six relegating and discussing Russia only under regional powers and not global powers where only the US and China are discussed. The authors do not flow together on this issue, they clash. However, this does not impede the message of the authors to the audience.

In the opening chapter, the author mentions that the book probably benefited from information collected through responses to questions and interviews conducted in the meetings she participated in (p. viii), creating an impression that the book used qualitative data which was gathered and known by the author and not shared with the audience. Sharing of research data is important for the reader’s independent analysis and judgement. In addition, limits exist to data reported directly by the author because such data can rarely be independently verified (Brutus, Aguinis and Wassmer, 2013).

The author narrates the history of Iran’s nuclear programme which no doubt has a bearing on the regional order, but the increased role of Iran in the region through support of proxy terror organisations is conspicuously left out. Iran is deemed the biggest sponsor of terror organisations in the region such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and other Shia leaning groups. The author states that Iran’s “strategies are far more dangerous for the GCC than the nuclear ambitions” (p. 78). This statement is not entirely true following the 2020 rapprochement between some of the Gulf monarchies (United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Morocco, and Bahrain) and Israel (Hitman and Zwilling, 2021). The rush to normalise relations with Israel has been widely analysed by scholars and observers as a counterbalance against Iran and especially its nuclear ambitions, as Israel provides the deterrence. The Iran threat perception is widely believed to be one of the reasons for the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab majority countries (Quamar, 2020). Saudi Arabia, the most influential GCC member, is yet to officially normalise relations with Israel but has recognised the enormous danger of Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is also the Minister of Defence for Saudi Arabia, declared in 2018 that Iran’s development of a nuclear bomb will be matched by Saudi Arabia as soon as possible (BBC News, 2018; Guerrero, 2021).

The omission of other regional actors, especially from North Africa which is only mentioned and not discussed in detail in relation to the new regional order, leads to a biased conclusion. Egypt, for instance, is a key player in Middle East politics (Haggag, 2019). The role of the state of Israel also cannot be wished away in discussions about regional

order because of its edge in security and military affairs as well as its possession of nuclear weapons. With the likely withdrawal of the US from the region, which is accurately captured in the book, Israel is being prepared to play an increased security and dominant role in the region on behalf of Washington with potential shifts in the regional order ([Bianco and Lovatt, 2020](#)). There is a greater focus on the GCC to the extent of failing to analyse the longstanding issues in the region like the Israel-Palestinian question and the Kurdish question which have a bearing on the regional order. The ongoing conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen have also projected new regional actors ([Amour, 2020](#)).

The book, despite responding well to the main issues under investigation, leaves the reader with some fundamental questions which remain unanswered in its six chapters. For instance, it is not clear who is leading the new regional order, what kind of order is being referred to, whether political, security, economic or social, or what strategic innovations or institutions or coalitions the leader of the new order has initiated to consolidate power, who are the challengers to the new order etc. The quest for the answers to these questions clearly leaves the reader yearning for more from the author. Additionally, the book adapts a simplistic narration of the events in the region rather than a critical analysis of these events based on the established frameworks such as the international relations theories, which I believe would have led to a better understanding of the supposed new regional order in the region.

Finally, although the author does not make it clear who this book is meant for, I find the book timely, accurate and I strongly recommend the collection for concerned academicians, policymakers and professionals in the fields of diplomacy, foreign policy, economics, regional studies and international relations as well as geopolitics, energy and international security and order.

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