

II. МИНТАҚАВИЙ ХАВФСИЗЛИК ЧАҚИРИҚЛАРИ
Regional Security Challenges
Вызовы региональной безопасности

NEW REGIONALISM AND OLD ISSUES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract: *The concept of regionalism is based on the cultural, historical, and political identification of individuals, peoples, states, and leaders with a certain region. Regionalization is linked to institution-building, conclusion of formal agreements, that are sometimes replaced by informal ties. In the Middle East regionalization is being affected by contradictory trends, since the region has always been considered highly conflict-prone and not subject to change. It was the conflicts that became the backbone elements, which in their own way have tightened this space and resulted in the formation of coalitions and alliances. State-to-state confrontations, most of which have acquired the character of rapidly internationalizing conflicts, and the growth of militarization are still evident in the MENA region. At the same time, the trends towards rapprochement and normalization are becoming clearer, and in the future, they even might contribute to an integration. The involvement of both states and non-state or quasi-state actors in these processes is noteworthy. The independence of regional leaders is being strengthened, small countries are becoming more active and more aware of their national interests.*

The existing fragmentation of the Middle East does not mean the absence of internal ties and interdependence; common challenges have been giving birth to the attempts to develop group strategies. Situational cooperation between different organizations is being observed, new logistics and transport routes are being built, trade and economic relations between the countries are being activated.

Keywords: *regionalism, international relations, independence, influence, conflicts, normalization, challenges, values, interests, Middle East.*

Regionalism and the subsystem of international relations

Regionalism is becoming one of the main international trends. Regional state and non-state actors, faced with the fact that globalization hinders their cultural diversity, are trying to build their own organizing mechanisms. Regionalism can be both intra-state (these are forms of ethnic nationalism,

political separatism) and interstate (alliances, common markets, and so on). [Idris, Kurtbag 2014: 1340].

The internal regional dynamics in combination with external impact lead to the constantly developing and evolving spaces, and their analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach: "Regions are still constructed as phenomena of space, strung on an archaic time axis. They are not perceived as living pulsating and unfolding phenomena of space-time" [Ilyin, Nechaev 2022: 14].

The use of interdisciplinary research is at best the prerogative of large research teams, which does not exclude the importance of point-based studies of specific trends in particular regions. Thus, the complexity and mobility of regionalization processes are studied by Russian and Western researchers [Voskresensky, Koldunova, Pronin 2012; Prokhorenko 2015; Hettne, Söderbaum 2008; Fawcett, Hurrell 1995; Söderbaum, Shaw 2003; Schulz, Söderbaum, Ojendal 2001].

The concept of regionalism has changed over the years: at first, the emphasis was placed on integration trends that affect the entire region through new supranational institutions, primarily in Europe: "The European Union (EU) is seen as the most successful example of regional integration and this 'model' is largely based on an exclusive 'institutional' regionalism where integration is achieved through endowing specific institutions with far-reaching decision-making powers to shape the behaviour of the member states". [Yeo 2010: 324].

The example of European institutions was considered the most successful, but it could hardly serve as the only reference point for regions with different culture and identity. Taking into account regional specifics, and, in particular, conflicts and confrontation between states, institution-building or conclusion of formal agreements is not always possible. In addition, along with states, an increasingly important role in international relations has been played by non-state actors.

Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, the authors of the "new regionalism" concept, note that the focus of the analysis should be not only state actors and official interstate structures, but also non-state actors and what is sometimes called "non-state regionalization" [Hettne, Söderbaum 2008: 104]. Regionalization and globalization act in this context as interrelated manifestations of a common global transformation. Björn Hettne's conclusions

[Hettne 2003: 22-42] prompted the study of a wider range of drivers – the role of non-institutional factors in regional and global economics and politics.

Non-institutional factors include the activities of intraregional communities with their own goals and interests. Regionalisation, according to Professor of Science Po (Bordeaux) Daniel Bach, is a more encompassing notion than regionalism, since it takes into account processes and configurations in which states are frequently not the key players. "Regionalisation may correlate with the implementation of regionalist strategies and translate into processes of cross-border integration. Regionalisation can grow irrespective of state policies and at times even in opposition to their stated purpose. In Africa, as in Asia or the Middle East, the diasporic networks associated with trade or labour migration do not carry any particular ambition to build regional integration. At the same time, the aggregation of individual strategies stimulates cross-border and trans-regional integration processes through the development of markets located in the borderlands..." [Bach 2018: 345-346].

Cross-border trade and exchange, depending on the circumstances, are not always legal, but they can replace the interrupted ties between peoples and states, ensuring the economic survival of communities by maintaining the flow of goods (for example, informal economic exchanges between Syria and Lebanon). In a crisis, quasi-state actors are taking on more and more functions. Thus, Lebanon is critically short of fuel and Hezbollah, as part of the political mechanism and a major player in the economic sphere, fills the gap left by the state by importing fuel from Iran¹.

In international relations, regionalization refers to such phenomena as the revival/rise of regional powers and the formation of regional integration groupings, including those of the preferential type [Voskresensky, Koldunova, Pronin 2012: 107]. Attempts to build intraregional trade and economic relations in the Middle East have been made repeatedly, but in general the level of economic integration is low. Since 1998, the formation of the PAFTA (Pan-Arab Free Trade Agreement), has been underway, but has not yet been completed. Despite the existing problems, the free trade zone ensured an increase in trade turnover between the countries from 7.6% in 2002 to 16.3% in 2017. [Fedorchenko 2020]. The Agadir Agreement, signed in 2004 between

¹ Iskandarani A. Hezbollah supporters celebrate as tankers carrying Iranian fuel arrive in Lebanon. *The National News*, 16.09.2021. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iran/2021/09/16/trucks-carrying-iranian-fuelarrive-in-lebanon> (accessed 04.07.2022).

Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt, is also aimed at stimulating free trade². Finally, one can mention the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), the main functions of which were later absorbed by OPEC. At the same time, “the predominant attention of experts to the political and institutional aspects of regional integration and cooperation projects obscures the long, complex, multi-level nonlinear process of building an international political region with the participation of non-state actors and the use of informal institutions and practices” [Prokhorenko 2015: 22].

For many years the Middle East was viewed as a fragmented region dominated by authoritarian regimes and traditionalism, where changes are slow and affect at best only specific social strata. In the last decade, the idea that the whole world is changing, and the Middle East remains unchanged (the concept of Arab exclusivity [Stepan, Robertson 2004]), has been undermined, if not discredited. The claims that adherence to the status-quo persists primarily in foreign policy [Korany 2013: 78] are also subject to revision, since, despite the conflict, there is clearly a trend towards formation of new relationship between the adversaries.

The factors contributing to the changing matrix of relations among the regional players, can be summed up as following:

1. Further strengthening of influential Middle Eastern states - Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, to which Egypt, previously weakened, and now rapidly gaining weight, is being pulled up.
2. The rising activity of smaller states (UAE, Qatar) that have traditionally been under the influence of more powerful players.
- 3 The consolidation of quasi-state actors (Hezbollah, Hamas).
4. The emergence of common security perceptions, despite the dividing conflicts. (For instance, the Palestinian problem, while still keeping a significant destabilizing potential, has been losing its impact upon the alignment of forces).
5. The trends towards normalization and de-escalation.
6. The new logistics and transport interconnectivity.

The processes forming the subsystem of international relations in the Middle East partially follow the trends traditional for the region, but sometimes significantly correct them and lead to unexpected results.

² Agadir Agreement. <https://www.bilaterals.org/?-agadir-agreement-&lang=en> (accessed 11.09.2022).

Between activism and dependence

A significant number of researchers tend to associate the present political processes in the region with the consequences of the “Arab Spring”, which weakened a number of states that previously had significant weight – Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria. Their place was taken by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE [Melkumyan 2016: 55]. The ambitions of the Gulf monarchies are derived from their special role as exporters of energy resources. Nowadays they are giving an example of economic and social modernization which implies (along with the resources) the development of human capital.

Their claims for a special regional role have been reflecting a newly acquired and acknowledged national interests. However, the smaller countries' efforts to become more politically independent could not but lead to conflicts generated, among other things, by traditional perceptions of hierarchy. An example of an acute and protracted conflict in the ranks of the GCC countries can be the 2017-2021 tensions between Qatar and other members of the Council led by Saudi Arabia, and joined by Egypt, Jordan, Maldives, Comoros, etc. Qatar was accused of supporting terrorism and extremism (first of all, the Muslim Brotherhood), of interfering in the affairs of Arab states, which, in particular, was attributed to critical reviews of Al Jazeera³. The harsh boycott has had unexpected results: it has contributed to the strengthening of the national identity of the Qataris and also encouraged Doha to play more noticeable international role. The last was evidenced by Qatar's activity in the context of the Afghan situation. Doha provided a platform for negotiations between the Taliban leaders and the US representatives; its efforts have accentuated its readiness to play a significant role outside the Gulf. At the same time, Doha did not intend to become a lawyer for the Taliban; it is criticizing the Taliban's domestic policies, in particular their unwillingness to respect women's rights⁴.

Similar goals are set by the UAE, whose foreign policy is characterized by pragmatism and independence: “Expanding the portfolio of military-political and economic assets is not only a means of ensuring the UAE security and

³ Qatar row: Saudi and Egypt among countries to cut Doha links. *BBC News*, 05.06.2017. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40155829> (accessed 16.06.2022).

⁴ Qatar called on the Taliban to respect women's rights. *RBC*, 09/13/2021. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/613f4ccb9a7947d9b4a854fb> (accessed 09/12/2022) (In Russ).

implementing ambitious development plans, but also a way to increase prestige and influence in the international arena” [Tyukaeva 2021: 674].

At the same time, “independent policy” can be considered a relative concept. Even the most powerful states of the Middle East feel pressure from the outside, primarily from the West. They try to resist, continuing to balance and agreeing to concessions. The response of a number of countries in the region to the policy of the West, primarily the United States, in the context of the Ukrainian crisis is indicative. An international organization known as Crisisgroup has prepared a study on the development of the socio-economic situation in the Middle East in connection with the global crisis and its consequences.

It indicates the vulnerability of a number of States in the region that depend on food and energy imports. However, there are countries that export hydrocarbons themselves and feel quite confident. Vulnerability and relative self-sufficiency determine behavior patterns - willingness to resist external pressure or, on the contrary, attempts to join the majority. "Acquiescence to Western policy preferences, such as the UN General Assembly vote condemning the Russian invasion, often resulted from Western diplomatic pressure – as in the cases of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates – rather than genuine, voluntary agreement"⁵.

The most influential regional countries tried to identify the policy that meets their interests best. A number of Gulf States, remaining American partners, have been developing relations with Russia and are interested in the diversification of ties. Thus, the US attempts to use its “special relationship” with oil-producing Arab countries and encourage them to increase production did not yield results. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia even refused in March 2022 to answer President Biden's phone call⁶ and stated that Riyadh was committed to the OPEC+ agreement with Russia, which limits the increase in production to 400,000 barrels per month⁷.

⁵ The impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa. *International Crisis Group*, 14.04.2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa> (accessed 14.05.2022).

⁶ Saudi, Emirati leaders decline calls with Biden during Ukraine crisis. *The Wall Street Journal*, 08.03.2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-emirati-leaders-decline-calls-with-biden-during-ukrainecrisis-11646779430> (accessed 12.09.2022).

⁷ Saudi crown prince says Kingdom still committed to OPEC oil agreement with Russia. *S&P Global Commodity Insights*, 27.02.2022. <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latestnews/oil/022722-saudi-crown-prince-says-kingdom-still-committed-to-opec-oil-agreement-with-russia>

Both Saudi Arabia and Russia are interested parties in OPEC+. It is no coincidence that OPEC Secretary General Mohammed Barkindo warned the EU that it would be impossible to replace more than 7 million barrels per day of Russian oil and oil products⁸. Soon after the July 2022 visit of US President Biden to Saudi Arabia⁹, OPEC countries and partners announced a reduction in production by 2 million barrels per day from November 2022¹⁰. Saudi Arabia is negotiating with China on partial payment of oil supplies in yuan¹¹ 13 and on the construction of a uranium processing plant in Al Ula¹².

Washington is trying to expand military coordination between Arab allies and Israel, and here Riyadh has an important role to play. However, as the American politician and Middle East specialist Aaron Miller wrote, "Biden probably already knows that under MBS, at best, Saudi Arabia is likely to remain an unpredictable partner whose interests episodically align with America's but whose values never do"¹³.

Israel positions its policy as an example of independent behavior dictated by the desire to prioritize its own interests. Yet, in a tense situation, the factor of American influence may become decisive. It may be recalled that since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, Jerusalem has tried to take a relatively balanced position, taken its unwillingness to spoil relations with the Russian Federation. Over time, balancing became more and more difficult for the Israeli elite. On the one hand, the prime minister Ehud Lapid was concerned about domestic political challenges – the increasing fragility of the ruling coalition and the reduction of seats in the Knesset controlled by it, and on the other – the need to coordinate the foreign policy with a strategic ally. The turning point,

(accessed 08.07.2022).

⁸ OPEC warns EU it's impossible to replace Russian. *Energy Connects*, 12.04.2022. <https://www.energyconnects.com/news/oil-and-gas/2022/april/opec-warns-eu-it-s-impossible-to-replace-russian-oil> (accessed 02.05.2022).

⁹ Holland S., El Yaakoubi A., Renshaw J. Biden hopes for more oil and Israeli integration at Arab summit in Saudi. *Reuters*, 17.07.2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/biden-hopes-more-oil-israeliintegration-arab-summit-saudi-2022-07-16> (accessed 17.07.2022).

¹⁰ OPEC and allies to cut oil output in October; gas prices jump after Russia pipeline closure – as it happened. *The Guardian*, 05.09.2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2022/sep/05/euro-low-sterling-gasprices-russia-shutdown-opec-markets-business-live> (accessed 08.09.2022).

¹¹ Biryukov M. WSJ reported on the negotiations between Saudi Arabia and China on the sale of oil for yuan. *Forbes*, March 15, 2022. <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/459139-wsj-soobsil-o-peregovorah-saudovskoj-aravii-skitaem-o-prodaze-nefti-za-uani> (accessed 06/11/2022). (In Russ.)

¹² Bhadrakumar M.K. US' coercive diplomacy with Saudi Arabia. *Indian Punchline*, 06.05.2022. <https://www.indianpunchline.com/us-coercive-diplomacy-with-saudi-arabia> (accessed 08.05.2022)

¹³ Miller A.D. What Biden needs to get if MBS wants to reconcile CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/05/opinions/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-reconciliation-miller/index.html> (accessed 15.05. 2022).

apparently, was Israel's invitation to the NATO summit at the Ramstein Airbase in Germany in April 2022¹⁴. It caused a negative reaction in Russia, which was intensified in response to the Israeli bombing of facilities in Syria, including the airport in Damascus.

The Jerusalem Declaration, signed by the US President and the Israeli Prime Minister in July 2022, confirmed the commitment of the United States to Israel's security, in particular the commitment not to allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, for which Washington is ready to use all elements of its national might¹⁵. In practice, such obligations of a strategic ally require reciprocal steps thus narrowing Israel's options of maintaining its own approaches to international problems.

Turkey's policy can serve as an example of implementing its own interests. Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 was seen by NATO as a challenge. Ankara used in its interests the desire of Sweden and Finland to join NATO, opposing their membership in an attempt to get important concessions from them. At the same time, the interest in developing ties with Russia determined Ankara's unwillingness to follow in the wake of Western sanctions policy. Turkey's policy is ambiguous. On the one hand, it has taken measures to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel. On the other hand, its relations with Iraq, Syria and Greece are clearly straining¹⁶. Turkey has interests in the region that directly affect its relations with Russia. For example, it was pursuing a rather hard line in the north-east of Syria in order to ensure control in the Kurdish areas. Given Russia's presence in Syria, the policy of the Turkish leadership might have complicated Moscow's implementation of its obligations.

Iran plays a special role in the region. It perceives its positions as vulnerable, faced with the hostility of Israel and other countries, and at the global level – with the desire of the United States to change the regime. In such circumstances, the Iranian leadership prioritizes security interests that shape its foreign policy course in the region and beyond.

¹⁴ Israel took part in the summit at the Ramstein base <https://mignews.org/news/politic/izrailprinyal-uchastie-v-sammite-na-baze-ramshtajn.html> (accessed 06/20/2022). (In Russ.)

¹⁵ The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration. <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/israel-us-sign-joint-declaration-on-strategic-partnership-14-jul-2022> (accessed 16.07.2022).

¹⁶ Dorsey J. In Turkey, zero problems with neighbours mean multiple problems. https://jamesmdorsey.substack.com/p/in-turkey-zero-problems-with-neighbours?utm_source=email (accessed 08.09.2022).

Amid growing international tensions, the Middle East is experiencing the impact of global transformations. The requirements of association with the West determine the difficulties of maneuvering for individual Middle Eastern states, hinder the desire to realize their own interests.

From cautious rapprochement to accords

Contradictory trends of modern regionalization in the Middle East include attempts to de-escalate tense relations between opponents. The most prominent place is taken by the Abraham Accords, which include the treaties of Israel with the UAE and Bahrain, concluded in September 2020, as well as with Morocco and Sudan [Zvyagelskaya 2021]. At the heart of a new relationship between Israel and the Arab monarchies of the Gulf are concerns about Iran's policy in the region. Initially the Arab-Israeli accords were perceived as a more effective deterrence of Iran, but there is no complete coincidence of the approaches of both sides.

For the Israeli leadership, Iran's nuclear program is of fundamental importance, which, if successfully completed, would undermine the Israeli monopoly on nuclear weapons in the region. In practice its position on the JCPOA has always been ambivalent. A former Israeli diplomat Alon Pinhas wrote that Israel has always been against, but 'against' is a complex concept. Israel was against the agreement, but also against the US withdrawal from the agreement, even though it pushed the United States to withdraw from the agreement... Israel was against the nuclear deal from the very beginning, because it claimed that it was a bad agreement... But Israel was also against the lack of an agreement, because it is as bad as a bad agreement, and maybe even worse... Israel, of course, was against the renewal of the agreement, because it is just as bad as the original agreement, which Israel opposed.¹⁷

The Arab monarchies were much more focused on Iran's regional policy and its use of proxies. It is here that their interests coincide with Israel's. Israeli armed forces, trying to prevent further strengthening of Iran's positions close to its own borders and to weaken its allies, regularly strikes Iranian targets in Syria

¹⁷ Pinkas A. The U.S. can live without an Iran nuclear deal. Can Israel? *Haaretz*, 27.05.2022. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-05-27/ty-article/.premium/the-u-s-can-live-without-an-iran-nuclear-dealcan-israel/00000181-0578-d090-abe1-e57d1ab30000> (accessed 28.05.2022).

and Iraq. The number of attacks on convoys and weapons depots has increased¹⁸.

Israel's importance to the Arab states can be traced down to their relations with the US. Countries that have normalized relations with Israel see them as a chance to improve their position in Washington or believe that Israel can partially compensate for what they have not received from the United States¹⁹. The Arab-Israeli relations have deepened due to the expansion of cooperation in the field of security, transport, trade and economy. For example, in February 2022, Israel signed an agreement with Bahrain, in particular on the coordination of intelligence activities, joint exercises and cooperation in the field of weapons production²⁰. At the same time, there appeared unconfirmed reports on the possibility of selling the Israeli Iron Dome missile interception system to the UAE²¹.

The region is becoming spatially more unified. Jerusalem and Amman signed an agreement on opening new flight routes and reducing flight times between the countries of the Persian Gulf, the Far East and Asia, Europe and the North America. There are routes from Iraq, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as the UAE, and even one route over Iran, which will be used for flights from China. Flights from Bahrain and the UAE, as well as from many other countries, will be able to fly over Israeli airspace to Europe and North America and vice versa²².

At the same time, Israeli military activity to contain Iran may lead to the positioning of "Accords" as an anti-Iranian coalition, that does not suit their Arab participants. With the exception of Bahrain, all the participating states of the Jeddah Security and Development Summit in July 2022 (as well as Jordan and Egypt) are cooperating diplomatically with Tehran. Qatar and Oman have economic and political relations with Tehran and interact with it in the field of

¹⁸ Golan Heights and South/West Syria. *International Crisis Group*, 10.06.2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/golan-heights> (accessed 30.06.2022).

¹⁹ Makovsky D. A new regional role for Israel, as Washington shows signs of stepping back. *The Times of Israel*, 28.03.2022. https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israels-new-role-in-the-middle-east-easing-the-arabsway-in-washington/?utm_source=The+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=daily-edition-2022-03-28&utm_medium=email (accessed 27.06.2022).

²⁰ Bassist R. Israel signs security cooperation agreement with Bahrain. *Al-Monitor*, 03.02.2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/02/israel-signs-security-cooperation-agreement-bahrain> (accessed 18.05.2022).

²¹ Israel said ready to sell Iron Dome to UAE, build regional defenses against Iran. *The Times of Israel*, 01.02.2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-ready-to-sell-iron-dome-to-uae-build-regionaldefenses-against-iran> (accessed 03.06.2022).

²² Blumenthal I. From Friday: Iraq and Saudi-bound planes in Israeli airspace. *Y Net News*, 10.08.2020. <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/S1kFmKhUD> (accessed 25.02.21).

security. Iraq is positioning itself as a mediator in regional diplomacy²³. At the end of August 2022, the UAE decided to return its ambassador to Teheran²⁴. The Emirates is one of Iran's important trade and economic partners. The trade turnover between them amounted to \$14.1 billion in 2021, and in 2022 it should reach \$20 billion²⁵.

Saudi Arabia has been negotiating with Iran since April 2021 to ensure greater predictability in the Gulf and in Yemen. They led to the resumption of Iran's representation at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation²⁶.

While the hostility remains, dialogue can become a prologue to reducing tensions in the region. The ongoing processes of rapprochement and de-escalation in the region seem to be a consequence of the fears of states regarding the possibility of large-scale clashes. In the absence of regional control and prevention mechanisms, they can be seen as a kind of attempt to strengthen the individual state security and ensure greater predictability of the situation through new commitments.

Transformation of conflicts

Conflicts are an important characteristic of the Middle East: they shape the overall regional balance of power and affect the content of regionalization processes. Gradually the conflicts change their hierarchy and nature. Interstate conflicts persist (recall the recent conflict between Qatar and other Arab states, the confrontation with Iran), but rapidly internationalizing intra-state clashes are coming to the fore. The "Arab Spring" served as a trigger for the crises in Libya and Syria. A new stage of the civil war in Yemen has begun, Lebanon, burdened with internal problems, is plunging into an ever deeper crisis, and the number of "failed states" has increased. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict also periodically enters crisis stages.

²³ Haghirian M., Toivanen H. The regional diplomacy taking place in the Persian Gulf must not be dismissed. *Al Sharq Strategic Research*, 27.07.2022. <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/07/27/the-persian-gulf-2> (accessed 07.08.2022).

²⁴ United Arab Emirates reinstates ambassador to Iran after six-year absence. *The Guardian*, 22.08.2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/22/united-arab-emirates-reinstates-ambassador-to-iran-after-six-year-absence> (accessed 20.09.2022).

²⁵ Trade between Iran-UAE expected to hit \$20b by Mar. 2022. *Tehran Times*, 16.06.2021. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/462057/Trade-between-Iran-UAE-expected-to-hit-20b-by-Mar-2022> (accessed 08.09.2022).

²⁶ Iranian diplomats are resuming work in Saudi Arabia for the first time in six years. *Islam Today*, 01/17/2022. <https://islam-today.ru/novosti/2022/01/17/iranskije-diplomatyi-vozobnovlyaut-rabotu-v-saudovskoj-aravii-vpervye-za-sest-let> (accessed 03/18/2022). (In Russ.)

That said, the Palestinian problem on the Arab agenda is gradually being obscured or replaced by other challenges and threats. Nevertheless, it is the Palestinian problem that is being used by Arab leaders and individual states (primarily Turkey and Iran) to draw attention to their own principled approaches. The religious aspect of the Palestinian issue is increasingly emphasized by quasi-state actors, such as Hamas on the Palestinian side, or more or less institutionalized radical settlers on the Israeli side.

The Palestinian problem refers to conflicts of values – the warring parties are divided by historical narratives, symbols, religion and ideology. The relative decline in its importance may indicate that conflicts of interest are beginning to play an increasingly important role. The value elements of conflicts have not disappeared; confessional and religious differences are used instrumentally by opponents to influence individual communities, create proxies, etc. Formally conflicts of interest are easier to resolve, since a search for compromise is in line with more or less pragmatic approaches, and not within the framework of conflicting narratives.

Still in the case of intra-state conflicts, the issues of power sharing between players acquire for them not only practical dimension (ensuring access to power and resources), but sometimes becomes existential. More often than not either the elites or the opposition leaders are threatened with complete political or even physical removal from the political arena. In the Arab states that have become victims of civil wars, both the institutions and a culture of compromise are lacking. Their formation is prevented by "culturally fixed social-political practices, constantly reproduced over a long time, as well as stable, albeit evolving, civilizational matrices..." [Naumkin, Kuznetsov 2019: 49]. These elements of regional political identity are manifested to a certain extent in the rise of Islamist ultra-radical terrorist organizations: their repulsive crimes have been blocking any chance for reconciliation.

Attempts to reach agreements in intra-state conflicts take place, but they often become short-lived. The subsystem of international relations in the Middle East has always been characterized by a security deficit. Intra-state conflicts often were results of the uneasy rise of national statehood, influenced by interethnic, tribalist, confessional, as well as historical factors. The active involvement of other states in civil mutinies indicates an increase in the significance of proxy wars, which can be considered by opponents as a "safer"

and optimal way to strengthen influence. A shift towards such conflicts does not exclude the preservation of old and the emergence of new interstate conflicts.

Regionalization in the Middle East is subject to rather contradictory trends. A high level of conflict, leading to the fragmentation of the region, coexists with the tendencies towards rapprochement. The involvement of both countries and non-state or quasi-state actors in these processes is noteworthy. The local players have been trying to widen their room for maneuver despite the dependence on external powers - the United States, the EU, Russia and China.

Modernization trends are evident even in the most conservative states, where a new generation of rulers has come to power, interested in the development and competitiveness of their states and societies. The Middle East can be justfully perceived as a dynamically developing subsystem of international relations, whose actors are trying to realize their own interests, considering (consciously or intuitively) the ongoing processes of regionalization as a means to achieve this goal.

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