Session 6

Middle East: Between Normalisation and War

Moderator

Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui

Speakers

Dr. Dania Thafer, Executive Director, Gulf International Forum,

Dr. Tarik M. Yousef, Director and Senior Fellow, Middle East Council,

Dr. Abdullah Baabood, Chair, State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies, Waseda University

Dr. Abdullah K. Alshayji, Professor, Former Chairman and Director, Political Science Graduate Program, Kuwait University

Discussants

Dr. Hakkı Uygur, President, IRAM Center

Dr. Muhammad Affan, Director, Al Sharq

Oytun Orhan, Researcher, ORSAM

Dr. Heba Raouf Mohamed Ezzat, Assistant Professor, Ibn Haldun University

Tarek Megerisi, Senior Policy Fellow, MENA Programme, European Council on Foreign Relations

Vali Nasr, Majid Khadduri, Professor of International Affairs and Middle East Studies, Johns Hopkins-SAIS; Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council's South Asia Center

Charles Kupchan, Professor of International Affairs, Georgetown University; Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

Ali Bakir, Senior Policy Fellow, MENA Programme, European Council on Foreign Relations

Key Takeaways

- The Middle East faces challenges in balancing regional security and national interests amid the normalisation process. Economic factors, especially the cost of regional rivalries, play a crucial role.

- Strategic exhaustion and a focus on economic nationalism contribute to confidence-building measures, emphasising the need for cooperation despite trust issues.

- Disagreement exists on US retrenchment, with concerns about its reliability as a security guarantor. Shifts in focus and perceived decline contribute to a complex geopolitical scene.

- Ongoing conflicts are rooted in hegemonic and ideological competition, compounded by global system changes and leadership transitions.

- Iran is perceived as strategically winning in the region due to its tangible actions through proxies like the Houthis. Gulf states are engaging with Iran to contain its influence rather than confront it directly, highlighting the evolving dynamics and potential shifts in alliances.

- Public opinion reflects post-democratic moments, post-ideological shifts, and post-truth trends, contributing to the region's political dynamics.

Summary

The expert roundtable titled "Middle East: Between Normalisation and War" delved into the complex geopolitical landscape leading up to October 7th, highlighting the normalisation process and the challenges faced in the region. An expert discussed the shift from maximalist to pragmatic policies among Gulf countries, focusing on optics-driven normalisation with Türkiye and Iran. The impending normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Israel created dilemmas for Gulf states, balancing regional security and national interests. Economic factors, particularly the cost of regional rivalries, were emphasised, with concerns about the role of the Houthis and potential US counterattacks.

Other experts addressed the role of the economy in normalisation, citing strategic exhaustion and a realisation of diverging political and economic interests. Confidence-building measures, exemplified by dialogue between Türkiye and the UAE, were seen as essential. The analysis underscored challenges faced by Türkiye, Egypt, and Jordan, leading to unsustainable costs of regional rivalries, potentially disrupted by incidents like the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Another expert disagreed with US retrenchment, citing incidents like the withdrawal from Afghanistan, dysfunctional American politics, and a shift in focus to the Indo-Pacific. Concerns were raised about the US's reliability as a security guarantor, contributing to a declining perception in the Arab world. Another expert saw visible retrenchment post-Iranian oil attacks but acknowledged ongoing US presence in the Gulf.

The geopolitical scene was examined in the expert roundtable, emphasising endemic problems, ideological competition, and global system changes. The role of non-state actors, particularly Hamas, and potential US retrenchment were discussed. The complex public attitude was explored, considering post-democratic moments and the influence of social media on information consumption.