



Inter-Arab Rivalry and Regional Hierarchy in the Post-Liberal Middle East

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The Puzzle: Why Iran’s Collapse Has Not Produced More Arab-Israeli Normalization

The Twelve-Day War of June 2025 delivered the most devastating blow to

Iranian strategic power in the Islamic Republic's history. Israel's Operation Rising Lion, launched on June 13, executed five waves of airstrikes involving over two hundred aircraft against Iranian nuclear facilities, military installations, and leadership targets.¹ Mossad operatives and commando units sabotaged air defense systems while car bombs detonated across Tehran, killing more than a dozen senior nuclear scientists.² The campaign decapitated the IRGC's intelligence leadership, destroyed the Natanz enrichment facility, and eliminated approximately 80 percent of Iran's ballistic missile launchers.³ On June 22, the United States entered the war directly. Operation Midnight Hammer deployed B-2 stealth bombers, carrying the 30,000-pound Massive Ordnance Penetrator against the deeply buried Fordow enrichment plant—a target inaccessible to conventional attack.⁴ By the ceasefire on June 24, over a thousand Iranians were dead,

Iran's nuclear program had been set back by years, and the Axis of Resistance that had structured regional politics for two decades lay in ruins.⁵

Western and Israeli analysts responded with predictions of regional transformation. The straightforward logic was that with Iran neutralized as a strategic threat, the primary obstacle to Arab-Israeli alignment had been removed. Saudi Arabia, freed from the need to hedge against Tehran and impressed by demonstrated Israeli-U.S. military capability, would accelerate toward normalization. Think tanks from Washington to Tel Aviv produced analyses explaining why the normalization “train,” though stalled, remained “on track.”⁶ The Atlantic Council anticipated that 2026 would “set the tone” for Saudi-Israeli integration.⁷ Defense analysts described normalization as “likely,” given converging Gulf interests.⁸ Israeli commentators

declared the U.A.E. a “true ally” and anticipated Saudi Arabia would follow.⁹

These predictions failed comprehensively. Saudi Arabia maintained studied neutrality throughout the Twelve-Day War, offering no public support for operations against a state Riyadh had long identified as its principal adversary. When President Trump convened a Gaza peace summit in Egypt, Saudi Arabia was conspicuously absent from a table occupied by the United States, Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar.¹⁰ Far from accelerating toward normalization, Riyadh intensified its insistence on Palestinian statehood as a precondition—a demand it knew to be unacceptable.¹¹ The Kingdom publicly condemned Israeli military actions and positioned itself as guardian of Islamic causes rather than as a partner in the emerging regional configuration.

More striking still was what followed. By December 2025, Saudi Arabia had entered open confrontation not with Iran but with

the U.A.E.—its ostensible partner in the Yemen intervention and fellow member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. When U.A.E.–backed Southern Transitional Council forces seized the oil-rich Hadramawt and Mahra provinces bordering Saudi territory, Riyadh responded with airstrikes against an Emirati weapons shipment at the port of Mukalla.¹² Saudi officials accused Abu Dhabi of threatening the Kingdom’s national security—the very language once reserved for Iran.¹³ Moreover, the Kingdom restored its relations with Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood figures, aligned itself with Qatar and Turkey, and actively retriggered populist, anti-Zionist sentiments.

The U.A.E. was forced to announce the withdrawal of its remaining forces from Yemen.¹⁴ Within six months of Iran’s strategic collapse, the defining regional confrontation had shifted from a Saudi–Iranian axis to a Saudi–Emirati one, with

Israel's normalization partners now in direct conflict with the Kingdom that was supposed to join them.

This outcome demands explanation. The standard model of Gulf strategic behavior (threat-driven alignment with whoever can provide security against Iran) predicted convergence, and convergence did not occur. Either the model was wrong or the causal logic connecting the Iranian threat to Arab hedging was never as straightforward as assumed. This essay argues for the latter interpretation. The removal of Iran did not open space for convergence—it intensified competition. The same structural shift that eliminated one constraint simultaneously removed another: the external pressure that had made Gulf alignment with Israel strategically rational. What emerged was not a new regional order but a permissive environment for middle power rivalry, one in which Israel's very capabilities became a reason to constrain rather than embrace it.

Understanding this dynamic requires moving beyond threat-based models of alignment toward a structural analysis of regional competition. The argument proceeds through three levels: first, the macrostructural shift toward post-liberal international conditions; secondly, the regional vacuum created by simultaneous U.S. disengagement and Iranian collapse; and thirdly, the cross-domain competition among states whose power portfolios are fundamentally incommensurable. Section 2 establishes the structural transformation. Section 3 develops a framework for understanding competition across asymmetric capabilities. Section 4 distinguishes between two registers of regional power—elite permissibility and mass political legitimacy—and explains their significance for Saudi strategy. Section 5 articulates what I term “constrained outsidership”—the strategic value to Arab states of maintaining Israel as both partner

and pariah. Section 6 reframes regional competition as a triangular game in which Washington may still function as the arena where decisive payoffs occur. Section 7 draws implications for regional order in light of the Saudi–U.A.E. rupture.

The Structural Transformation

The return of inter-Arab rivalry as a primary driver of Middle Eastern politics reflects a structural shift that extends beyond the region. The liberal international order that consolidated after the Cold War is contracting. Trade wars, unilateral sanctions, withdrawal from international institutions, and the open abandonment of rule-based multilateral frameworks by their principal architects have transformed the operating environment for states everywhere. Washington now pursues strategic objectives through bilateralism, power projection, and selective coercion without liberal rationalization or broader order-building strategies. The post-liberal

condition is no longer anticipation; it is the present.

What has emerged is not multipolarity in the classical sense—a stable distribution of power among great power blocs—but something more fluid: an environment in which U.S. hegemony persists in transactional and episodic form while the rule-based architecture that once structured its exercise has eroded. Access to markets, capital, and security guarantees can no longer be secured through institutional compliance or ideological alignment. These goods must be bargained for repeatedly from positions of demonstrated leverage.

The strategic response across regions has been the pursuit of autonomy: reducing dependence on any single patron, diversifying partnerships, accumulating leverage through control over critical nodes in global supply chains, information networks, and energy markets. India straddles Washington and Moscow. Turkey

oscillates between NATO, Russia, and the Gulf. Brazil and South Africa refuse alignment on Ukraine while extracting concessions from both sides. This is not nonalignment in the mid-century sense—ideological equidistance from competing blocs—but positional maneuvering in an order that has become radically transactional. Diplomatic capital accrues less from reputation for restraint than from demonstrated capacity to obstruct, delay, or redirect outcomes.

The Middle East was never fully disciplined by liberal order norms. Sovereignty violations, authoritarian persistence, great power intervention without accountability—the region operated under partial exception long before the current unraveling. But that exception was itself structured by U.S. hegemony. Washington set multilateral frames, red lines, suppressed intra-allied rivalries, provided security guarantees, and offered a path to status through alignment.

The Gulf monarchies learned to operate within this architecture. They never internalized its norms, but they depended on its constraints. Those constraints have now weakened; U.S. arbitration has become unreliable. The security umbrella remains, but its coverage is uncertain and its price is rising. Status can no longer be secured solely through proximity to Washington.

At the regional level, post-liberalism produced a specific configuration: the simultaneous weakening of both poles that had structured Middle Eastern politics since 2003. On one side, U.S. withdrawal from system management: Washington no longer underwrites political outcomes, enforces coalition discipline, or invests sustained capital in shaping regional settlements. Its interventions have become episodic, interest-specific, and decoupled from order-building objectives. The Twelve-Day War exemplified this pattern: U.S. military power proved decisive when deployed, but the

deployment served immediate objectives—destroying Iranian nuclear capacity—rather than constructing a stable regional architecture. On the other side, the collapse of the Iranian countersystem took place: For two decades, the Axis of Resistance had functioned as a negative ordering force. It constrained Israeli freedom of action, limited Arab strategic autonomy, and created a ceiling on regional realignment by threatening multifront escalation. The post-October 7 Israeli targeting of Iranian proxies, the collapse of the Assad regime, and the operations of June 2025 systematically dismantled this structure. What remains is a collection of degraded local actors operating under severe constraint.

The combined effect is the collapse of residual bipolarity. A region that had been organized around two boundary-making forces—U.S. management and Iranian resistance—has lost both as effective

constraints. With fewer external ceilings and weaker systemic discipline, competition has become direct, positional, and difficult to contain. States now accumulate influence through control over logistics corridors, investment pathways, narrative platforms, and conflict portfolios. They cultivate veto points, practice issue linkage across arenas, and treat symbolic causes as instruments of statecraft. The Saudi–U.A.E. rupture over Yemen is not an aberration but the predictable consequence of this structural shift: when external constraints weaken, latent rivalries surface.¹⁵

Cross-Domain Asymmetry

Conventional frameworks for analyzing regional competition often assume that power can be ranked along a single dimension or aggregated into composite indices. States are stronger or weaker; hierarchies are clear or contested. This approach obscures what is most distinctive about the current Middle Eastern

configuration: the radical incommensurability of the power portfolios held by the principal competitors. Israel, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Qatar, and Turkey are not competing along a single axis that one of them can dominate. They hold fundamentally different kinds of capabilities, operate in different domains, and impose costs on each other through asymmetric means. Understanding this requires disaggregating power into its constituent terrains.

Israel's portfolio is concentrated and dense with hard power. It rests on technological superiority, intelligence dominance, military overmatch, escalation control, and a privileged position within the U.S. security architecture. These assets enable Israel to degrade adversaries rapidly, enforce red lines through precise violence, and shape neighboring security environments without territorial occupation. Israeli strategic doctrine privileges denial over

consolidation—preventing hostile state formation, disrupting adversarial integration, and maintaining freedom of action across multiple theaters. The Twelve-Day War demonstrated the ceiling of this capability set. Israel dismantled the Iranian countersystem, decapitated the IRGC, induced the prior year's regime change in Syria, and paralyzed Tehran's nuclear program. No other regional actor could have achieved this.

Yet Israel's portfolio is also narrow. It generates hard power dominance but minimal capacity for political integration. Israel cannot compete for regional legitimacy; the structural conditions do not permit it. Its interventions shape threat environments but cannot anchor a regional order. It can veto outcomes it opposes but cannot build coalitions around outcomes it prefers. This is not a criticism but a description of portfolio composition. Israel is optimized for a specific mode of regional

engagement—coercive denial—and that mode, however effective, does not translate into the kinds of authority that would make Israel a regional leader rather than a regional power.

Saudi Arabia's portfolio is organized around different assets: scale, capital, and symbolic authority. The Kingdom is the only Arab state that combines significant demographic weight, vast financial reserves, and custodianship of Islam's holiest sites. These attributes generate mass legitimacy: the capacity to mobilize regional publics, shape discourse, and define political priorities across the Arab and Islamic worlds. No amount of material investment can replicate the symbolic capital that flows from Mecca and Medina. Riyadh can credibly claim custodianship over causes that resonate at the level of popular sentiment—above all Palestine—and convert that claim into agenda-setting power that smaller or non-Muslim states cannot match.

Saudi Arabia cannot, however, compete with Israel on Israel's terrain. The Kingdom possesses neither the technological base nor the military capacity to project decisive force beyond its borders. Its decade-long intervention in Yemen demonstrated the limits of Saudi hard power. Even with overwhelming resource advantages, Riyadh could not impose its preferred outcome against a much weaker adversary. The Saudi portfolio is optimized for a different mode of competition—symbolic mobilization, financial leverage, and convening authority—and that mode operates in domains where Israeli advantages do not translate.

The U.A.E. presents a third configuration. Abu Dhabi compensates for demographic and symbolic limits through concentrated network power: a dense web of investments, logistics infrastructure, commercial ports, free trade zones, and security partnerships, extending from the Eastern Mediterranean to

the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean. These assets allow the U.A.E. to embed itself in supply chains and financial circuits that confer structural leverage without requiring political mobilization. Emirati influence operates through contracts, basing rights, intelligence cooperation, and investment dependency rather than through ideological appeal or mass legitimacy. This model privileges elite connectivity over popular politics—an efficient design that nonetheless imposes limits. The U.A.E. possesses minimal capacity for narrative penetration beyond globalized commercial and security elites and limited resilience when disputes migrate onto the terrain of mass sentiment. The December confrontation in Yemen exposed precisely this vulnerability: when Saudi Arabia reframed Emirati activity as a threat to Arab territorial integrity and national security, Abu Dhabi found itself unable to contest the narrative.¹⁶

Qatar has specialized differently still: in narrative production, Islamist patronage, and mediation services. Al Jazeera remains the most effective transnational Arabic media platform capable of setting agendas and reframing conflicts across the region. Doha's cultivation of Islamist networks provides access to nonstate actors whom others cannot reach. Qatar's comparative advantage is highest in unresolved conflicts. It generates leverage by positioning itself as indispensable to communication with actors whom other states refuse to engage. The practical effect is that instability becomes an asset: the more a file remains open, the greater the value of Qatari access, funding, and narrative capacity.

Turkey combines geographic centrality with coercive flexibility. A large conventional military, an expanding defense-industrial base, and control over critical transit corridors linking Europe, the Black Sea, and the Middle East provide Ankara with

options unavailable to the Gulf states. Turkey's use of drones, expeditionary deployments, and managed proxy forces has established it as the region's most operationally flexible middle power. Politically, Ankara oscillates between coalition membership, autonomous intervention, and spoiling—extracting rents from its capacity to shift alignments. Turkey's gains in Syria during 2025—filling the vacuums left by Iranian collapse—demonstrated this flexibility in action.

The analytical payoff of this disaggregation is a framework for understanding regional competition as cross-domain rather than hierarchical. Israel dominates hard power, intelligence, and escalation control; Saudi Arabia dominates scale, religious symbolism, and convening authority; the U.A.E. dominates logistics networks and elite commercial access; Qatar dominates narrative production and Islamist brokerage; Turkey dominates coercive flexibility and

geographic leverage. These currencies are not directly comparable, which is precisely why each actor can impose costs on others in different domains without any single state achieving comprehensive dominance. Israel can impose security costs and shape threat environments; Saudi Arabia can impose legitimacy costs and shift the normative terrain of regional politics; the U.A.E. can impose economic costs through investment leverage; Qatar can impose reputational costs through media campaigns; Turkey can impose territorial costs through military intervention. What looks like competitive balance is actually competitive incommensurability—a condition likely to produce chronic rivalry rather than stable hierarchy.

Two Registers of Regional Power

The cross-domain framework illuminates a distinction that proves essential for understanding Saudi strategy: the difference between elite permissibility and mass

political legitimacy as registers of regional power. Israel's position in the contemporary Middle East is defined by a sharp divergence between these two registers. In elite security and commercial channels, Israel has become increasingly acceptable. Intelligence cooperation with Gulf states is extensive and largely routinized. Economic ties have expanded, particularly in technology, agriculture, and cybersecurity. Diplomatic engagement, while often informal, is substantive. The Abraham Accords formalized relationships that had been developing for years, and even states that did not sign, maintain functional working relationships with Jerusalem below the threshold of public acknowledgment.

In mass politics, Israel remains radioactive. Across the broader Arab and Islamic public sphere, normalization with Israel carries severe reputational costs and exposes states to brutal narrative attacks from Doha and adversaries. Popular sentiment, shaped by

decades of media framing, educational curricula, and religious discourse treats Israel as a colonial imposition, an enemy of Islam, and an ongoing source of Palestinian suffering. This sentiment is sufficiently widespread and intense that no Arab government can ignore it without risking domestic legitimacy. Polling data consistently shows that Arab publics reject normalization by large majorities even in states that have signed the Abraham Accords.

The U.A.E.–Israel axis is optimized for the elite register. It rests on security cooperation, commercial integration, and shared interest in regional stability. These ties are robust within their domain but shallow in mass political depth. The U.A.E. has limited capacity to legitimate its Israel relationship to Arab publics; instead, it has pursued normalization while attempting to insulate domestic opinion from regional pressures. This strategy works as long as

competition remains confined to elite channels. It becomes vulnerable when rivals shift the terrain of competition onto the mass register—precisely the move Saudi Arabia has recently made, attacking the U.A.E. as a Zionist, apostate state.

Saudi leverage operates primarily in the mass legitimacy layer. The Kingdom's religious authority, media reach, and capacity to define the boundaries of acceptable Arab politics give it tools that other Gulf states lack. When Saudi Arabia reactivates anti-Zionist rhetoric, foregrounds the Palestinian cause, and positions itself as defender of Islamic causes, it is not merely performing for domestic audiences. It is shifting regional competition onto terrain where its comparative advantages are decisive and where the U.A.E. is structurally exposed. The U.A.E. cannot respond in kind; it lacks the symbolic resources. Nor can Israel counter Saudi narrative offensives through the means at which it excels.

Military operations do not generate mass legitimacy, and advocacy campaigns have minimal penetration in Arabic-language media ecosystems shaped by al Jazeera and Saudi-funded outlets.

This explains why Saudi rhetorical escalation is strategically effective even when it cannot be operationalized militarily. The objective is not to threaten Israel with force—Saudi Arabia has no capacity for that—but to impose costs in the domain where Saudi advantages are concentrated: legitimacy, narrative, and the authority to define what counts as acceptable Arab conduct. By framing the U.A.E.'s Israel relationship as betrayal, and, by extension, framing Emirati regional policy as serving Zionist interests, Saudi Arabia raises the reputational price Abu Dhabi pays for its strategic choices without having to match Emirati capabilities in commercial networks or Israeli capabilities in security. The December 2025 confrontation followed this

logic precisely: Saudi accusations that the U.A.E. was undermining Arab territorial integrity and acting as a conduit for Israeli regional ambitions shifted the conflict onto terrain where Riyadh held the advantage.¹⁷

The asymmetry is the point. Each actor competes where it is strong, and the interaction produces chronic contestation rather than resolution.

The Logic of Constrained Outsidership

The two-register framework clarifies what might otherwise appear puzzling: Saudi Arabia's evident lack of interest in normalizing relations with Israel despite the removal of the Iranian threat and the potential benefits of open cooperation. The conventional analysis assumed that normalization is the natural endpoint and that Saudi reluctance reflects either domestic constraints—religious establishment opposition, public sentiment—or bargaining tactics: holding out for a higher price in the form of U.S. security guarantees, Palestinian

state commitments, or nuclear technology access. On this reading, the question is not whether Saudi Arabia will normalize but when and at what price.

This analysis fundamentally misreads Saudi strategic logic. The Kingdom is not seeking normalization at a higher price; it is seeking to avoid normalization while extracting maximum benefit from the appearance of potential normalization. The distinction matters because it generates different predictions about Saudi behavior and different expectations about regional trajectories. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) reportedly told Secretary of State Antony Blinken in early 2025 that he did not personally care about the Palestinian issue but that his people did, requiring him to secure something “meaningful.”¹⁸ This admission is often read as evidence that Saudi normalization is fundamentally a matter of domestic political management. But the more significant implication is that

MBS views Palestinian solidarity instrumentally—as a constraint to be managed rather than a commitment to be honored—which means its invocation serves strategic purposes beyond the Palestinian file itself.

One must consider the structural implications of full normalization. An Israel that is formally accepted into the regional order becomes a competitor for regional primacy that Saudi Arabia cannot match on any terrain where Israel excels. Israel's technological base, military capacity, intelligence apparatus, economic dynamism, and deep integration with the United States position it objectively as the region's most capable state. If the contest for regional leadership were conducted on these terms, Saudi Arabia would lose. The Kingdom's advantages lie elsewhere: in scale, capital, religious authority, and the capacity to mobilize Arab and Islamic sentiment. These advantages are maximized precisely when

Israel remains outside the regional political order—present as a security partner, valuable as an intelligence collaborator, but excluded from the legitimate competition for regional leadership.

The optimal configuration for Saudi interests is therefore Israel as both partner and pariah: covert cooperation combined with formal alienation. This is not hypocrisy or merely a transitional stage en route to normalization. It is a stable strategic equilibrium that serves Saudi interests better than any alternative. Security cooperation with Israel provides tangible benefits in intelligence sharing, technology transfer, and implicit deterrence against common adversaries. Formal nonrecognition preserves Saudi Arabia's claim to Islamic leadership, its leverage over the Palestinian file, and its capacity to impose legitimacy costs on rivals who have normalized. The arrangement allows Riyadh to have it both

ways—and the incentive structure rewards maintaining this configuration indefinitely. This logic explains why the removal of Iran increased rather than decreased Saudi reluctance to normalize. When Iran posed an existential threat to Gulf security, alignment with Israel carried strategic benefits that outweighed the legitimacy costs. The Kingdom needed Israeli capabilities and could justify cooperation—at least internally—as a necessary response to an overwhelming danger. With Iran neutralized, that justification evaporates. The security benefits of normalization remain, but they are now marginal rather than existential. Meanwhile, the costs have increased: a normalized Israel is no longer a necessary partner against a common enemy but a rival claimant to regional leadership, competing for U.S. attention, investment flows, and strategic influence. The Twelve-Day War demonstrated Israeli capability so decisively that it strengthened rather than

weakened the case for keeping Israel formally excluded. Why would Saudi Arabia legitimate a competitor it no longer needs? The Palestinian cause serves this strategy as its primary instrument. Saudi Arabia's sudden renewed emphasis on Palestinian statehood, its global campaign to purchase recognition of a Palestinian state from Western powers, its criticism of Israeli military operations, and its positioning as guardian of Palestinian rights are not expressions of ideological commitment or popular pressure, though both exist: they are deployments of the most efficient tool available for maintaining Israel's constrained outsider status. The Palestine cause functions simultaneously as legitimacy insurance—protecting the crown prince from accusations of abandoning Islamic causes; as status restoration—reclaiming Saudi Arabia's position as leader of the Arab and Islamic worlds; and as competitive weapon—imposing costs on the

U.A.E. and constraining Israeli regional integration. Most importantly, it keeps the door to normalization closed while keeping Washington attentive to Saudi preferences, a combination that maximizes Saudi leverage without requiring Saudi concessions.

The Triangular Game: Washington as Prize

Analysis of Saudi-Israeli relations often treats the United States as context—the external hegemon whose preferences constrain regional actors and whose policies create incentives for alignment or defection. This framing captures something real but misses the degree to which Washington has become not merely context but the central arena of competition—and misses too how the post-liberal transformation of U.S. hegemony has intensified rather than diminished that centrality. The key distinction is between two functions that U.S. power once performed simultaneously: system management and patronage

distribution. Washington has largely abandoned the first while retaining dominance in the second through bilateralism. The goods that regional actors most need—advanced military technology, security guarantees, diplomatic cover, international legitimacy—remain concentrated in U.S. hands. What has eroded is the stable regional system through which access to those goods was once allocated.

The United States remains the decisive source of the capabilities that matter most for hard power competition, and no alternative patron offers comparable goods. China provides investment and infrastructure but not security commitments or weapons platforms that match U.S. systems. Russia sells arms but cannot extend the kind of umbrella that deters regional adversaries or confers status in global institutions. Gulf diversification toward Beijing and Moscow has not produced substitution. When Riyadh seeks F-35

aircraft, binding defense commitments, or access to nuclear technology, there is only one address. When Israel requires diplomatic cover at the United Nations, resupply during extended operations, or the implicit threat of U.S. intervention, there is only one guarantor. The transformation of U.S. hegemony into transactional mode amplifies competition over such goods rather than diminishing it. When commitments were institutionalized, each actor knew approximately what alignment would cost and what it would yield. Post-liberal conditions have destabilized these parameters without eliminating the underlying competition. Saudi Arabia and Israel both seek to lock in advantages while configurations remain favorable, knowing that the next administration, the next crisis, the next shift in U.S. domestic politics could redistribute access unpredictably. The urgency of positional maneuvering increases

precisely because the rules have become uncertain.

Yet this centrality operates differentially across the domains of regional competition identified earlier. U.S. patronage is decisive for hard power assets: the military systems, intelligence relationships, and security guarantees that constitute Israel's portfolio and that Saudi Arabia seeks to acquire. Competition in this domain necessarily runs through Washington because the goods themselves are American. But the domains where Saudi advantages concentrate operate differently. Religious authority, mass legitimacy, narrative penetration, and convening power over the Arab and Islamic worlds are not U.S. goods to be distributed. Washington cannot confer custodianship of Mecca and Medina; it cannot manufacture popular credibility across Arabic-speaking publics; it cannot determine which voices carry weight in Islamic discourse. These assets are indigenous to the region. When

Saudi Arabia competes on this terrain—deploying anti-Zionist rhetoric, foregrounding Palestinian solidarity, positioning itself as guardian of Islamic causes—it is not seeking U.S. approval. It is exercising capabilities that do not depend on U.S. patronage and cannot be countered by U.S. intervention. The same applies to Qatari narrative production through al Jazeera, to Turkish geographic leverage and coercive flexibility, and to Emirati network power embedded in commercial and logistics infrastructure. These portfolios generate influence through mechanisms that bypass the Washington arena entirely.

Israel's strategy in this triangular game is to preserve the privileged structure of its relationship with Washington and prevent any U.S.–Arab arrangement that would dilute it. The U.S.–Israel security relationship is unique: deeper institutionalization, more extensive intelligence sharing, larger military aid

packages, and stronger congressional support than any other U.S. alliance. Every Saudi demand that conditions normalization on U.S. security guarantees or advanced weapons transfers threatens to expand the U.S.–Saudi relationship at potential cost to U.S.–Israel exclusivity. Israeli strategy, therefore, involves both demonstrating indispensable value—the Twelve-Day War showcased capabilities no other regional partner could replicate—and raising concerns about Arab reliability as an alternative recipient of U.S. investment.

Saudi strategy is the mirror image: to upgrade the U.S.–Saudi relationship toward the depth currently enjoyed by Israel without paying the price of normalization. The Palestinian cause serves as the primary instrument. By foregrounding Palestinian statehood as a precondition, Riyadh raises the price of any Washington-brokered agreement to levels that U.S. domestic politics renders prohibitive. The file

functions as a blocking mechanism. It prevents normalization while allowing Saudi Arabia to extract U.S. concessions—security commitments, arms sales, diplomatic support—as inducements to keep normalization theoretically possible.

Simultaneously, Palestinian positioning generates returns in the mass legitimacy register outside U.S. control: imposing reputational costs on normalizing states; constraining Israeli regional integration; reinforcing Saudi claims to Islamic leadership. The same moves that block progress in Washington score points in regional competition for symbolic authority. No other issue offers comparable returns across both registers.

The triangular game also shapes dynamics beyond the Saudi-Israeli relationship. Emirati normalization was partly a move in this competition: by signing the Abraham Accords, the U.A.E. signaled alignment with U.S. preferences and secured benefits that

Saudi Arabia had declined. The Saudi response—distancing from the U.A.E., reactivating Palestinian solidarity—differentiated Riyadh’s position and demonstrated that the Emirati path is not the only route to U.S. partnership. Saudi Arabia offers Washington a different value proposition: not normalization but stabilization, not alignment with Israel but management of the Arab and Islamic worlds in ways that serve U.S. interests without requiring Israeli integration. The December confrontation in Yemen partly reflected this logic: Saudi Arabia signaling that it, not the U.A.E., would determine the security architecture of the Arabian Peninsula regardless of Abu Dhabi’s U.S. relationships. The persistence of U.S. primacy without U.S. system management—patronage without order—is what makes the triangular game so intense. The arena remains central even as the rules governing it dissolve.

Implications: Regional Order Without Convergence

The analysis developed here suggests a regional trajectory quite different from the optimistic scenarios that proliferated after the Abraham Accords and resurfaced following Iran's strategic defeat. The Middle East is not on a glide path toward integration in which economic cooperation, institutional development, and normalization steadily expand. What is emerging instead is a thin, permissive environment shaped by post-liberal conditions: weaker external arbitration, fewer reliable institutional constraints, and chronic reliance on positional bargaining. Rivalry will not fade; it will harden and likely intensify.

The Saudi-U.A.E. rupture over Yemen confirms this trajectory. Within six months of Iran's humiliation—the event that was supposed to unlock regional convergence—the two pillars of “moderate Arab” alignment found themselves in open

confrontation. Saudi airstrikes against Emirati assets, the expulsion of U.A.E. forces from Yemen, the mutual accusations of betrayal and subversion: these are not aberrations but the predictable consequences of a structural shift that removed the external constraints suppressing intra-Gulf competition. The confrontation also revealed the limits of the Israel-U.A.E. axis. When Saudi Arabia moved against Emirati positions in Yemen, Israel's normalization with Abu Dhabi provided no protection. The U.A.E.'s recognition of Israel, its security cooperation, its integration into Israeli strategic networks—none of this translated into leverage against Saudi pressure on terrain where mass legitimacy rather than elite connectivity determined outcomes.

This has direct implications for Israeli strategy. In a system defined by chronic competition, Israel has no viable alternative to sustaining military dominance, technological supremacy, intelligence

superiority, and escalation control. These capabilities secured Israeli interests against the Iranian countersystem; they remain essential in a post-Iranian environment where new forms of contestation are emerging. Normalization can reduce friction at the margins, but it cannot substitute for deterrence in a region where alignments remain fluid and where rivals continuously search for leverage. The Abraham Accords delivered real benefits, but they did not transform the regional structure. Israel remains a powerful but structurally isolated actor—capable of dismantling countersystems, incapable of anchoring a replacement order.

The implications extend to the global ideological battlefield. Anti-Zionism will remain politically active because it remains strategically useful. It is the highest-yield symbolic instrument in Middle Eastern politics: a mass mobilization platform, a reputational weapon against normalizing

states, and a tool for intra-Arab and intra-Islamic competition. Saudi Arabia has discovered—or rediscovered—that anti-Zionist positioning delivers returns that exceed its costs, particularly now that the Iranian threat no longer disciplines Gulf calculations. Where anti-Zionism intensifies, so does hostility to Jews. Arab and Islamist influence in Western media, universities, and political institutions means that the West itself has become a theater for Middle Eastern symbolic warfare with consequences that extend well beyond foreign policy.

Are there conditions under which regional equilibrium might emerge? Conceivably. If a stable post-Islamist Iran were to consolidate and align with Israel and the U.A.E. in a durable bloc—while Saudi Arabia either accommodated this arrangement or remained isolated—the resulting configuration might support a more stable hierarchy. Such an outcome would require regime change in Tehran, successful

state-building under new leadership, and sustained commitment from both Washington and Jerusalem to Iranian integration rather than containment. The protests that have occurred recently in Iran suggest that regime instability is real, but regime change remains uncertain, and what follows any transition is unknowable.²⁰ None of these conditions can be assumed; all face significant obstacles. Short of this or a similarly dramatic restructuring, the most likely trajectory is prolonged, high-intensity competition among middle powers with incommensurable portfolios, each seeking advantage in the domains where it is strong and imposing costs where its rivals are weak.

The Middle East that Malcolm Kerr analyzed in the 1960s was a region of ruthless inter-Arab competition overlaid with the Arab-Israeli conflict.²¹ The Middle East of the 2020s is returning to that pattern in a transformed context. The players have

changed: Gulf monarchies have replaced revolutionary republics as the principal Arab competitors; Iran's countersystem has collapsed; Turkey has reemerged as an active regional power; Israel's capabilities have expanded dramatically. The structure of competition has changed. Post-Soviet and now post-liberal international conditions have removed the external constraints that once disciplined regional rivalry. Cross-domain asymmetries have replaced simple hierarchies. Two registers of power—elite and mass—now define the terrain of contestation. But the fundamental dynamic persists: a region in which states compete for primacy, in which that competition shapes and instrumentalizes other conflicts, and in which the most valuable symbolic resource—the Palestinian cause—functions less as an end in itself than as a weapon in struggles that have little to do with Palestinian welfare.

Recognizing this reality is the beginning of analytical sobriety. The alternative is a recipe for persistent surprise. The predictions that followed the Twelve-Day War have already been falsified. The predictions that will follow the next regional shock will likely meet the same fate. The region is what it is: a competitive environment in which ambitious states pursue advantage through the means available to them, constrained only by the limits of their capabilities and the countermoves of their rivals. Understanding that environment requires attention to structural conditions rather than personalities, to portfolio composition rather than aggregate power, to strategic logic rather than ideological preference, and to the cross-domain asymmetries that make this competition chronic rather than resolvable. The post-liberal Middle East will be shaped by those who understand its logic. The costs of misunderstanding will be paid by those who do not.

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Notes

1. Wikipedia, “Iran–Israel War,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran–Israel_war, accessed January 19, 2026. The article documents that “the IDF attacked dozens of Iranian nuclear facilities,

military bases and infrastructure installations” with “more than 200 fighter jets” launching “five waves of air strikes” and dropping “more than 330 munitions on about 100 targets.”

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