

From Unipolar Hegemony to Multipolar Contestation: Middle East Conflicts and the Restructuring of Regional Order, 2021-2026

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Abstract

After the 2011 Arab Spring, the Middle East plunged into more than a decade of turmoil. The period from 2021 to 2026 witnessed a series of watershed events that fundamentally reshaped the region's geopolitical landscape. Adopting literature review and historical analysis methods, this study draws on official reports of international organizations, authoritative media coverage, and core academic publications to systematically examine the trajectories of five major conflicts: the May 2021 Israel-Hamas escalation, the Yemen war, the October 2023 Israel-Hamas war and its regional spillover, the collapse of the Syrian regime, and the evolving situation in Iraq. The research reveals a pronounced “resonance effect” in this wave of Middle Eastern conflicts—a phenomenon in which distinct conflicts become mutually reinforcing and escalate through chains of proxies, resource reallocation, and geopolitical linkages. The spillover of the Gaza war directly reduced Iranian aid to Syria, hastening the fall of the Assad regime; the Red Sea crisis systematically disrupted global supply chains; and the superimposed conflicts resulted in approximately 1.5 million deaths and tens of millions of displaced persons—the gravest humanitarian catastrophe of the 21st century. In terms of structural impact, the wars dismantled U.S. unipolar dominance in the region, elevated the roles of Russia and China, and accelerated the formation of a multipolar order. Iran's “Axis of Resistance” suffered a devastating blow, while Saudi Arabia and Türkiye notably expanded their influence. Moreover, the economic transformation of Gulf states was interrupted, and both education and healthcare systems across the region largely collapsed. Although a relative calm has prevailed in the Middle East since late 2025, the three root causes—the unresolved Palestinian question, sectarian hegemonic rivalries, and external intervention—remain entrenched, making the future trajectory highly uncertain.

Keywords

Middle East Conflicts, Power Reconfiguration, Resonance Effect, Humanitarian Crisis, “Axis of Resistance”

1. Introduction

The Middle East has long been one of the most volatile regions in the world due to its unique strategic position, abundant energy resources and complex religious and ethnic contradictions. Following the 2011 “Arab Spring”, the Middle East descended into over a decade of chaos, with the Syrian Civil War, the Iraq War and the Yemeni War breaking out in succession, inflicting profound suffering on the local people. Academic circles have reached considerable consensus on the root causes and evolution of conflicts in the Middle East: Liu (2024a) systematically demonstrates that the Palestinian issue is essentially a historical product driven by colonialism, imperialism and hegemonism in the struggle for hegemony over the Middle East. Liu (2024b) further examines, from the perspective of the evolution of international and regional patterns, how the persistent manipulation by major powers—from the contradictory arrangements by Western powers after World War I to the U.S.-Soviet hegemony during the Cold War—led to the protraction and complication of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Existing studies have repeatedly confirmed that extra-regional great power intervention has always been the core variable shaping the course of wars in the Middle East, while territorial disputes, economic crises and regional power games are the internal drivers of conflict outbreaks. In addition, analyses by Zhao and Wu (2023) on the dual role of oil and research by Wang (2023) on cross-border water conflicts over the Jordan River have enriched the explanatory framework of the driving mechanisms of Middle Eastern wars from the resource dimension.

In 2021, amid the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in the international landscape, the Middle East briefly witnessed a wave of reconciliation. The diplomatic rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar came to an end, and Türkiye’s relations with Egypt and Israel thawed. In particular, the historic resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, brokered by China in March 2023, brought hope for regional peace. Beneath the surface calm, however, contradictions were simmering. On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, triggering the most severe regional conflict since the Fourth Middle East War in 1973. The fighting quickly spilled over into Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Syria, and Israel and Iran engaged in three direct military confrontations. This conflict, which Israel described as its “Pearl Harbor moment”, broke all previous patterns in terms of its outbreak method, casualty scale and spillover extent. However, most existing studies only cover the early stage of the 2023 conflict, conducting preliminary discussions on issues such as its short-term energy impact and intelligence warning failures, and have failed to follow up on the subsequent dra-

matic evolution of the situation.

In December 2024, the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria collapsed, ending the 13-year civil war. In January 2025, U.S. troops completed their full withdrawal from areas under the control of the Iraqi government; in May, the United States reached a ceasefire with Yemen's Houthi forces; and in November, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2803, officially launching the Gaza peace process. The Middle East thus entered a period of comprehensive recuperation. This series of transformative events marked a fundamental reshaping of the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. However, existing academic research suffers from obvious lags and fragmentation, failing to provide systematic support for understanding this critical period of change. First, there is a temporal gap: most studies do not cover major events from 2024 to 2026, such as the regime change in Syria, the three direct military confrontations between the United States and Iran, and the breakthrough in the Yemeni peace process, making it difficult to present a complete evolutionary context of the regional situation from 2021 to 2026. Second, there is a lack of holism in the impact dimension: existing achievements mostly focus on the immediate consequences of single conflicts, such as humanitarian disasters and short-term oil price fluctuations, ignoring the "resonance effect" generated by the superposition of multiple conflicts. For example, how the spillover of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict directly led Iran to reduce its aid to Syria and accelerate the fall of the Assad regime, and how the Red Sea crisis systematically impacted global supply chains and regional economic transformation. Third, there is insufficient depth in research on the pattern dimension: in-depth and systematic theoretical interpretations have not yet been formed on core issues such as the formation process of the multipolar power structure in the Middle East following the U.S. strategic contraction, the disintegration mechanism of Iran's "Axis of Resistance", and the internal divisions within the Arab world.

Against this backdrop, this study adopts the literature research method and historical analysis method. Based on official reports from international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as authoritative media reports from Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily and CCTV News, and achievements from core academic journals at home and abroad, it comprehensively summarizes the process and impacts of wars in the Middle East from 2021 to 2026, and systematically sorts out the structural changes in regional politics, economy, diplomacy and society during this period. This study aims to fill the gaps in existing research and provide an objective basis for understanding the current situation in the Middle East.

2. Research Methods and Conceptual Definition

2.1. Research Methods and Data Sources

This study employs the literature review method and historical analysis method, with the research timeframe spanning from January 2021 to April 2026. The liter-

ature selection adheres to the following criteria: priority is given to official reports from international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF); followed by reports from authoritative media outlets including Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and CCTV News; academic outputs are exclusively selected from domestic and international core journals. To enhance the reliability of the study, cross-verification is conducted on official statistics, media reports, and academic assertions. In the event of discrepancies between different sources, data supported by multiple corroborations or issued by international organizations shall prevail. It should be noted that relevant developments from late 2025 to 2026 (such as the Syrian transition process, details of the U.S. military withdrawal, and the implementation of the Gaza ceasefire) are compiled based on open-source information as of April 2026. The corresponding conclusions are provisional and subject to verification through subsequent longitudinal tracking research.

2.2. Definition of Core Concepts and Explanation of Case Selection

The core analytical terms of this paper are defined as follows: Resonance effect: Refers to the phenomenon whereby distinct conflicts mutually intensify and escalate in a cascading manner through proxy relationships, resource redistribution, and geopolitical chain transmission. Its underlying mechanisms include the spill-over effect, resource crowding-out effect, and demonstration effect. Multipolar order: Denotes a regional power configuration that is no longer dominated by a single major actor state, but rather a pluralistic competitive landscape jointly shaped by three extra-regional powers (the United States, Russia, and China) and regional powers including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Israel.

Additionally, the term "Israel-Hamas" is used herein specifically to refer to the armed conflict in the Gaza Strip, whereas "Israel-Palestine" encompasses the broader full spectrum of political contradictions between the two parties, including issues pertaining to the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and refugees.

The rationale for selecting the aforementioned five conflict cases is as follows: they represent the most destructive and geopolitically consequential armed conflicts in the Middle East between 2021 and 2026, and exhibit clear causal linkages and resonance effects across both temporal and spatial dimensions. Geographically, this study focuses on West Asia and parts of North Africa directly implicated in the conflicts (notably the Red Sea-Suez Canal shipping corridor). Violent events in adjacent regions such as the Libyan civil war and the Sudanese conflict are excluded from the analysis. While these events bear some tangential connection to Middle Eastern geopolitics, they remain relatively independent in terms of their primary drivers, participating actors, and spatiotemporal trajectories, and thus do not compromise the integrity of the core argument presented in this paper.

On this basis, this study provides a comprehensive synthesis of the progression and impacts of Middle Eastern conflicts from 2021 to 2026, systematically delineates the structural transformations in regional politics, economy, diplomacy, and

society during this period, addresses critical gaps in existing scholarship, and offers an objective analytical foundation for understanding the contemporary Middle East landscape.

3. Overview of Major Wars in the Middle East (2021-2026)

3.1. The 2021 Israel-Palestine Conflict (May 2021)

The Israel-Palestine conflict that erupted in May 2021 constituted the largest military confrontation between the two sides since the 2014 Gaza War. The trigger for the conflict stemmed from two Israeli measures during Ramadan: first, the installation of roadblocks at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem to restrict Palestinian access to worship at the Temple Mount; second, the Jerusalem District Court's planned ruling to evict six Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Severe clashes broke out between Israelis and Palestinians at the Temple Mount on May 7 and 10, with Israeli police using force to disperse worshippers inside the mosque, resulting in hundreds of injuries. The immediate triggers of the 2021 conflict involved the status of Jerusalem and the eviction of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, and responses from regional countries showed obvious divergence (Wang et al., 2021).

On the evening of May 10, Hamas launched Operation Sword of Jerusalem, firing more than 150 rockets into Israel. Israel immediately responded with military strikes codenamed Operation Guardian of the Walls. The conflict lasted 11 days, during which Hamas fired approximately 4300 rockets, and the Israeli Air Force carried out over 1500 airstrikes on the Gaza Strip. The violence also spilled over into Israeli territory, with ethnic clashes between Jews and Arabs erupting in multiple cities—this marked the most severe internal ethnic confrontation in Israel since its founding.

Mediated by Egypt, the two sides reached a ceasefire in the early hours of May 21. The conflict resulted in 232 Palestinian deaths and over 1900 injuries, compared with 12 Israeli deaths and more than 300 injuries. Approximately 100,000 people were displaced in the Gaza Strip, and a large number of residential buildings, schools and hospitals were destroyed (People's Daily, 2021). This conflict exposed the irreconcilable nature of Israel-Palestine contradictions and laid the groundwork for the larger-scale conflict in 2023.

3.2. The Yemeni War (2021-2026)

The Yemeni War began in 2014 when Houthi forces seized Sana'a, and escalated into a regional conflict following the military intervention of the Saudi-led Arab coalition in 2015. Between 2021 and 2026, the war went through three phases: stalemate, the outbreak of the Red Sea crisis, and the final ceasefire (NetEase News, 2024).

In 2021, the Yemeni battlefield fell into a comprehensive stalemate. Houthi forces continued to launch missiles and drones into Saudi territory, targeting oil facilities and civilian sites, while the Saudi coalition conducted regular airstrikes

on Houthi-controlled areas, causing heavy civilian casualties. In April 2022, mediated by the United Nations and Oman, the two sides reached the first nationwide ceasefire agreement, which was extended twice until October. During the ceasefire period, civilian casualties dropped by 60%, and the humanitarian situation improved significantly. However, the ceasefire ultimately collapsed due to core disagreements over the opening of Sana'a International Airport and the distribution of tax revenues from the Port of Hodeidah.

Following the outbreak of the Israel-Palestine conflict in October 2023, Houthi forces launched attacks on Israel-linked merchant ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in the name of solidarity with Palestine. The Red Sea carries 12% of global trade and 30% of global container shipping. Houthi attacks prompted major global shipping giants to reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, increasing transportation costs by more than 30% and extending transit times by 7 - 10 days.

In December 2023, the United States and the United Kingdom formed the Operation Prosperity Guardian escort coalition and launched multiple airstrikes against Houthi forces. The European Union subsequently launched Operation Aspides. However, Western military strikes failed to curb Houthi attacks; instead, they garnered broader regional support for the group, leading to a continuous increase in the frequency and precision of attacks.

In March 2025, U.S. forces launched multiple rounds of high-intensity airstrikes on Yemen, inflicting heavy losses on Houthi forces. On May 6, mediated by Oman, the United States and Houthi forces reached a ceasefire agreement, under which the Houthis ceased attacks on U.S. and UK-linked merchant ships and the U.S. halted airstrikes on Yemen. After the Gaza ceasefire in October, the Houthis announced the suspension of all attacks targeting Israel and international shipping, bringing the Red Sea crisis to a basic end. On April 12, 2026, a Saudi delegation held historic talks with Houthi forces in Sana'a and reached the Sana'a Preliminary Peace Agreement, extending the ceasefire until April 2027 and establishing a Quadripartite Joint Committee to advance political negotiations. This marked a substantive breakthrough in the Yemeni peace process ([Xinhua News Agency, 2023](#)).

3.3. The October 2023 Israel-Palestine Conflict and Its Spillovers

The new round of Palestinian-Israeli conflict that erupted on October 7, 2023 spilled over into Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and other regions, emerging as the most extensive Palestinian-Israeli confrontation in geographic scope since the 1973 Yom Kippur War ([Xinhua News Agency, 2024](#)).

In the early morning of October 7, 2023, Hamas fired at least 5000 rockets from Gaza into Israel, while dispatching thousands of armed fighters to breach Israeli military lines and enter Israeli territory to attack both military and civilian targets. The attack killed approximately 1200 Israelis and took around 250 people hostage, marking the most devastating assault on Israel since its founding. Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu immediately declared a “state of war” and launched Operation Iron Swords. On October 9, Israel announced a total blockade of Gaza, cutting off supplies of water, electricity, fuel and food. On October 13, it ordered 1.1 million residents in northern Gaza to evacuate to the south. On October 28, Israeli ground troops entered Gaza, marking a full escalation of the war.

The conflict quickly spilled over across the entire Middle East. On October 8, Lebanon’s Hezbollah began firing rockets from southern Lebanon into northern Israel, triggering border clashes that lasted nearly two years and resulted in thousands of casualties on both sides. Yemen’s Houthi forces, as well as Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, also joined the conflict, launching attacks on Israeli and U.S. military targets in the region. Israel and Iran engaged in three large-scale direct military confrontations in April 2024, October 2024 and June 2025. Notably, on June 13, 2025, Israel carried out airstrikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities in Natanz and Fordow, severely setting back Iran’s nuclear program. Iran subsequently retaliated by launching hundreds of missiles and drones at Israel, pushing the regional conflict to its climax (Xinhuanet, 2026).

Mediated by Qatar and Egypt, the two sides reached a 7-day temporary ceasefire in November 2023 and a second ceasefire in January 2025, both of which collapsed due to unilateral violations by Israel. In September 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump proposed the “20-Point Peace Plan”, which received principled agreement from both parties. On October 9, all parties reached a first-phase ceasefire agreement. In November, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2803, supporting the deployment of an international stabilization force in Gaza.

As of April 22, 2026, the first-phase ceasefire had been successfully implemented: Hamas released all 247 hostages and remains, while Israel released 1200 Palestinian prisoners; Israeli troops withdrew completely from northern and central Gaza; the UN International Stabilization Force had deployed in Gaza; humanitarian aid corridors were fully opened, and 30% of displaced persons had returned to their homes. The second-phase negotiations, scheduled to begin in May in Doha, will focus on the long-term governance of Gaza and Palestinian statehood (CCTV News, 2025).

3.4. The Final Outcome of the Syrian Civil War (2021-2024)

The Syrian Civil War, which began in March 2011, was the longest-lasting and most far-reaching conflict in the Middle East. The collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024 marked the official end of the civil war (People’s Daily, 2024).

In 2021, with Russian and Iranian support, the Assad regime controlled approximately 70% of Syrian territory, while opposition forces were confined to the northwestern province of Idlib and the northeastern Kurdish-controlled areas. During this period, no large-scale military conflicts occurred in Syria, and the government began advancing post-war reconstruction. However, reconstruction progress was slow due to Western sanctions and funding shortages. Meanwhile,

remnants of the Islamic State (IS) remained active in the eastern desert regions, launching sporadic attacks.

On November 27, 2024, Syrian opposition forces launched a full-scale offensive in the northwest, capturing the three major cities of Aleppo, Hama and Homs within a week, while southern opposition forces simultaneously seized Daraa. On December 8, opposition forces entered Damascus, and Bashar al-Assad announced his resignation as president and fled to Russia.

The fall of the Assad regime was the result of a combination of long-accumulated economic crises, deteriorating living conditions, corruption and the spillover effects of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In particular, after October 2023, Iran diverted substantial resources to support Hamas and Hezbollah, significantly reducing its aid to the Syrian government, which became the immediate trigger for the regime's collapse.

Following Assad's ouster, Syria established a transitional government led by opposition leader Ahmed al-Sharaa. On January 18, 2026, the transitional government reached a comprehensive integration agreement with the Kurdish armed group the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). On April 10, the two sides signed the Framework Agreement for National Unity of Syria in Riyadh, which granted the Kurdish region a high degree of autonomy and stipulated that its armed forces would be fully integrated into the national army by the end of 2026. On April 16, U.S. troops completed their full withdrawal from Syria, and the transitional government took over all U.S. military bases. On April 20, the League of Arab States restored Syria's membership and established a Reconstruction Assistance Committee, pledging \$50 billion in reconstruction funds, officially launching Syria's national reconstruction process (Xinhua News Agency, 2026a).

3.5. The Evolution of the Situation in Iraq (2021-2026)

After defeating the Islamic State in 2017, Iraq entered a post-war reconstruction phase. Between 2021 and 2026, the situation in Iraq remained generally stable, with the core events being the full withdrawal of U.S. troops and the initiation of the country's independent development process.

Following the 2021 Iraqi parliamentary elections, government formation was delayed for nearly a year due to divisions among political factions, until the Sudani government was formed in October 2022. During this period, Iraq's security situation remained unstable: IS remnants launched frequent attacks in the western and northern desert regions, and the Iran-backed Shia militia group the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) repeatedly attacked U.S. military bases in Iraq, leading to persistent tensions in U.S.-Iraq relations.

In September 2024, the United States and Iraq reached an agreement to end the military operations of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and withdraw all U.S. troops by September 2025. On January 17-18, 2026, U.S. troops completed their full withdrawal from Al Asad Air Base, marking the complete evacuation of all U.S. military facilities under the jurisdiction of the Iraqi government. Currently,

the United States maintains only a small number of troops at Harir Air Base in the Kurdistan Region, with plans for a complete withdrawal by September 2026 (Xinhuanet, 2026). It should be explicitly clarified that the two aforementioned statements—“the full withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraqi government-controlled areas” and “the U.S. military retains a small contingent at Harir Air Base”—are not mutually exclusive. The former denotes that no U.S. military personnel are stationed at any military installations within the jurisdiction of the Federal Government of Iraq. The latter pertains to the Kurdistan Region, which functions as an autonomous entity under Iraq’s federal system and is therefore explicitly excluded from the definitional scope of “government-controlled areas”. To eliminate terminological ambiguity, both designations have been standardized throughout the manuscript as “Iraqi government-controlled areas” and “Kurdistan Autonomous Region” respectively for precise differentiation.

Following the U.S. withdrawal, Iraq entered a new phase of “self-reliant security maintenance”. Iraq held parliamentary elections in November 2025, and former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was nominated as the new prime minister in January 2026, with government formation ongoing. Economically, the Iraqi government increased investment in infrastructure construction. However, the economy remains heavily dependent on oil exports, and structural monoculture and corruption continue to be the main obstacles to development.

4. Background and Underlying Causes of the Wars

The series of wars and conflicts in the Middle East between 2021 and 2026 were the result of the long-term accumulation and interaction of multiple factors, including historical legacies, geopolitical games, economic and social contradictions, and extra-regional power intervention (Sun, 2026).

4.1. Historical Territorial and Religious Legacies

Territorial and religious issues constitute the root causes of conflicts in the Middle East. The core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies in territorial disputes and the status of Jerusalem. Since the founding of Israel in 1948, Palestinians have lost 78% of their land, and millions have become refugees. Israel’s continuous expansion of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which has been steadily encroaching on Palestinian territory, is the primary driver of the escalating Israeli-Palestinian tensions (Liu, 2024a).

As a holy site for three major religions, the status of Jerusalem remains the most sensitive issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel declared Jerusalem its “eternal capital” in 1980, a move that has not been universally recognized by the international community, which generally considers East Jerusalem as occupied territory and the future capital of a Palestinian state. Furthermore, the millennia-old rift between Sunni and Shia Islam has been continuously amplified in the regional hegemonic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, forming the underlying backdrop of the Yemeni War, the Syrian Civil War, and the con-

flicts in Iraq.

4.2. Geopolitical Games and Regional Hegemonic Rivalry

Located at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Middle East controls the critical chokepoints of global energy transportation and has historically been the central arena for great power competition. Between 2021 and 2026, the United States, Russia, and China engaged in intense international maneuvering in the region, while four major regional powers—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Israel—competed fiercely for regional dominance.

The United States has long dominated Middle Eastern affairs, with strategic objectives of maintaining its hegemony, controlling energy resources, and containing Iran and Russia. In recent years, however, as the U.S. has shifted its strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific, its military presence and political influence in the Middle East have steadily declined. Russia expanded its regional influence through military intervention in Syria and established multi-level cooperative relations with Iran, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia. China, adhering to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, successfully brokered the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, playing an increasingly important constructive role in the Middle East peace process.

The regional hegemonic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the core of geopolitical contradictions in the Middle East. As the leader of the Shia world, Iran has expanded its influence by supporting forces within the “Axis of Resistance”; as the leader of the Sunni world, Saudi Arabia has united other Sunni states to counter Iran. The two countries have waged proxy wars in multiple battlefields including Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, leading to the continuous escalation of regional conflicts.

4.3. Uneven Economic Development and Intensified Social Contradictions

The Middle East exhibits extreme unevenness in economic development. Gulf oil-producing countries boast high per capita incomes and relatively advanced levels of economic development, while countries such as Yemen, Syria, and Palestine suffer from underdeveloped economies, persistently high poverty and unemployment rates, with youth unemployment in particular generally exceeding 30%. This structural economic imbalance has intensified social contradictions and provided a breeding ground for extremism and terrorism.

The economic situation in the Palestinian territories is particularly dire. Israel’s prolonged blockade and restrictions have turned the Gaza Strip into what is widely described as “the world’s largest open-air prison”. Following the outbreak of the conflict in October 2023, Gaza’s economy suffered a devastating blow, with its full-year GDP contracting by 83% year-on-year (World Bank Group, United Nations, & European Union, 2025). As the poorest country in the Middle East, Yemen has experienced a total economic collapse after 11 years of war, with 80%

of its population dependent on humanitarian assistance (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021).

4.4. Extra-Regional Power Intervention

Extra-regional power intervention is a critical factor contributing to the protraction and complication of conflicts in the Middle East. The United States is the primary extra-regional intervener in Middle Eastern conflicts, and its long-standing policy of partiality toward Israel is the fundamental reason why the Israeli-Palestinian issue has remained unresolved for decades. The United States has also launched wars or conducted military interventions in countries including Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, inflicting profound suffering on local populations.

Iran's intervention in the Middle East is also extensive, as it provides substantial weapons, funding, and military training to Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthi forces, Shia militias in Iraq, and Hamas. Regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye have also actively intervened in regional conflicts by supporting their respective proxies, further exacerbating regional instability.

5. Direct Consequences of the Wars

The wars in the Middle East between 2021 and 2026 have inflicted the worst humanitarian disaster of the 21st century, and their direct consequences have laid the groundwork for subsequent structural transformations in regional politics, economy and society.

5.1. Casualties and Population Displacement

According to United Nations statistics, as of April 2026, various armed conflicts in the Middle East during this period have resulted in approximately 1.5 million deaths that are either directly attributable solely to or directly linked to the 2021-2026 wars, with civilians accounting for over 70 percent of all fatalities.

It should be emphasized that this figure incorporates partial historical cumulative data from the protracted conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq that had been ongoing for many years prior to 2021 (for instance, the cumulative death toll of the Yemeni war since its outbreak in 2014 stood at 377,000 as of 2021). It does not represent exclusively new casualties incurred during the six-year timeframe from 2021 to 2026.

Among these conflicts, the Israel-Hamas conflict that erupted in October 2023 has been the most devastating. As of September 2025, it had caused approximately 64,300 deaths and 162,000 injuries in the Gaza Strip (Xinhua News Agency, 2025). The Yemeni war, which began in 2014, had claimed a cumulative 377,000 lives by 2021, with 60 percent of these deaths attributable to indirect causes such as starvation and preventable disease (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021).

The wars have triggered the largest population displacement since World War II. As of mid-2025, around 4.5 million refugees and 13.3 million internally dis-

placed persons (IDPs) across the MENA region ([United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025](#)).

5.2. Property Damage and Humanitarian Crises

The wars have inflicted catastrophic damage to infrastructure. In February 2025, the Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA) report jointly published by the World Bank Group, the United Nations, and the European Union revealed that as of October 2024, the total economic and infrastructure losses in the Gaza Strip were estimated at \$49 billion (including \$29.9 billion in infrastructure losses and \$19.1 billion in economic and social losses). Specifically, 53 percent of housing units and 90 percent of educational and health facilities had been severely damaged or rendered inoperable. The report further projected that the recovery and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip would require approximately \$53.2 billion over the next decade, with \$20 billion needed in the first three years alone ([World Bank Group, United Nations, & European Union, 2025](#)).

The comprehensive blockade and infrastructure collapse have precipitated a severe humanitarian crisis. In February 2024, approximately 91 percent of the population in the Gaza Strip faced acute food insecurity; according to a joint assessment by the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization, the region was experiencing the highest level of catastrophic hunger crisis in the history of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) ([World Food Programme & Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(WFP & FAO\), 2024](#)). Large-scale outbreaks of infectious diseases such as cholera and measles have also occurred. According to the 2026 report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 22.3 million people in Yemen require humanitarian assistance, of whom 19.3 million face health risks, and 40 percent of healthcare facilities are only partially operational or completely non-functional ([United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\), 2026b](#)). These immediate disasters have not only claimed countless lives but also fundamentally undermined the social stability and governance foundations of regional states.

6. Multidimensional Impacts of the Wars on Middle Eastern Societies

The wars between 2021 and 2026 have not only caused immediate humanitarian disasters but also fundamentally reshaped the development trajectory and power dynamics of the Middle East across four dimensions: political, economic, diplomatic and social.

6.1. Political Dimension: Fundamental Restructuring of the Power Landscape

6.1.1. Accelerated Formation of a Multipolar Regional Power Structure

The wars have definitively brought an end to the unipolar era of U.S. dominance in the Middle East, giving rise to a multipolar order characterized by a tripartite

balance of power among the United States, Russia, and China, coupled with competition and cooperation among regional powers. This order is defined by the absence of any single actor capable of unilaterally setting the regional security agenda, whereby major issues require coordination among multiple power centers. The United States' trend of strategic retrenchment has become irreversible, as evidenced by its successive withdrawals from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, which have resulted in a marked decline in its military presence and political influence. Russia has consolidated its regional voice through military intervention and diplomatic mediation, while China, leveraging its neutral stance and economic strength, has played an irreplaceable constructive role in pivotal issues such as the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Concurrently, the balance of power among regional powers has undergone dramatic transformations: the Iranian-led "Axis of Resistance" has suffered severe setbacks, with its military deterrence capability significantly diminished; Saudi Arabia and Türkiye have emerged as the most influential Arab and Islamic states respectively, owing to their economic strength and diplomatic agility; and while Israel has consolidated its military superiority, its international standing has been severely damaged, and its security environment has become increasingly complex.

6.1.2. Disintegration of the Axis of Resistance Power System

During the regional conflicts from 2023 to 2025, the Iran-led anti-Israel and anti-U.S. alliance suffered a devastating blow. Hamas's military capabilities in Gaza have been largely destroyed, and its core command structure has been almost completely eliminated. Hezbollah has lost approximately 3,000 fighters, and its military bases and missile positions in southern Lebanon have been fully destroyed by the Israeli military. Notably, Israel's airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025 effectively set back Iran's nuclear program to near zero, sharply reducing its regional leadership capacity.

6.1.3. Complete Collapse of the Consensus on Arab Unity

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has exposed deep divisions within the Arab world. Countries such as Qatar and Türkiye have firmly supported Palestine, while states that have established diplomatic relations with Israel—including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain—have only verbally condemned Israeli atrocities without taking substantive measures such as severing diplomatic ties. The coordination mechanism of the League of Arab States has completely failed to form a unified position on regional hotspot issues, further weakening the overall international influence of the Arab world.

6.1.4. Historic Transformation of the Political Landscapes in Syria and Iraq

The 50-year rule of the Assad family in Syria has come to an end. The transitional government has fully aligned itself with Saudi Arabia and the West, the United States has lifted sanctions on Syria, and Iran's military presence in the country has essentially ended. Iraq, following the full withdrawal of U.S. troops, has entered a

new phase of “self-reliant security maintenance”. However, the integration of the Shia militia group the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) remains the core challenge to its political reconstruction.

6.2. Economic Dimension: Comprehensive Setbacks to Development Processes

6.2.1. Systemic Damage to Regional Economies

According to the Regional Economic Outlook report released by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in April 2026, the economic growth forecast for the MENAP region (Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) in 2026 has been sharply revised down to 1.4 percent, representing a 2.3 percentage point reduction from the October 2025 projection (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2026). Five of the eight oil-exporting economies in the region have entered economic contraction. Estimates from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) indicate that the ongoing armed conflicts in the Middle East have inflicted aggregate losses ranging from \$120 billion to \$194 billion on Arab states, a figure exceeding their total cumulative GDP growth in 2025 (People’s Daily, 2026). The economic collapse in the Gaza Strip has been particularly catastrophic: its GDP contracted by 83 percent for the full year 2024 (World Bank Group, United Nations, & European Union, 2025). The economies of Palestine, Yemen, Syria and other conflict-affected states have completely disintegrated, and their full-scale reconstruction will require decades of sustained international effort.

6.2.2. Severe Volatility in Energy Markets and Global Supply Chains

Energy infrastructure across the Middle East has endured repeated armed attacks, resulting in pronounced volatility in global crude prices. In the wake of Israel’s June 13, 2025 airstrikes on Iranian nuclear installations, Brent crude notched an intraday peak gain of nearly 13% (S&P Global Commodity Insights, 2025). Multiple leading international financial institutions led by ING Bank warned in 2025 that under an extreme conflict scenario with suspended maritime transit in the Strait of Hormuz, international oil prices could climb to \$120 - \$150 per barrel (Guezout, 2025). The Red Sea crisis has driven up global oil transportation costs by 30 percent. According to the Review of Maritime Transport report released by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in September 2025, the growth rate of global seaborne trade is projected to slow sharply to a mere 0.5 percent (UNCTAD, 2025). Consequently, numerous multinational corporations (MNCs) have been forced to restructure their supply chains and relocate production bases from Asia to Europe and North America, while the manufacturing, logistics, and tourism industries in the Middle East have suffered devastating blows.

6.2.3. Interruption of Economic Transformation Processes in Gulf States

Economic transformation plans such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and the United Arab Emirates’ Vision 2030 have encountered severe obstacles. The wars

have led to a substantial increase in security costs and financing costs for Gulf states, with significant amounts of capital diverted to military expenditures rather than transformation projects. International investor confidence has plummeted, resulting in a sharp decline in foreign direct investment (FDI). Fluctuations in energy prices have also destabilized fiscal revenues for oil-producing countries, making it difficult to provide sustained financial support for economic transformation (Beijing Daily, 2026).

6.2.4. Unemployment, Poverty and Erosion of Long-Term Development Potential

The wars have precipitated a sharp surge in regional unemployment rates. According to a briefing note released by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in October 2025, male unemployment in the West Bank stood at 31.7 percent and female unemployment at 33.7 percent, with the overall unemployment rate projected to rise to 38.5 percent by the end of 2025 (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2025). The economy of the Gaza Strip has completely collapsed; joint reports from the International Labour Organization and Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (ILO & PCBS, 2024) put local unemployment at nearly 80%. Reliable official unemployment statistics for Yemen and Syria remain inconsistent across institutional sources, so specific figures are not listed here. According to the April 2026 Macro Poverty Outlook issued by the World Bank, extreme poverty rates (based on the international poverty line) keep climbing among conflict-affected developing countries across the MENA region (World Bank, 2026). The destruction of long-term human capital—epitomized by the collapse of education and healthcare systems—will condemn the Middle East to a severe deficit in growth momentum for at least an entire generation.

6.3. Diplomatic Dimension: Reshaping of the Regional Diplomatic Order

6.3.1. Comprehensive Decline in U.S. Regional Leadership

The United States' unabashedly partisan stance on the Israeli-Palestinian issue has irrevocably eroded its standing across the Arab and Muslim worlds. The U.S.-led "Operation Prosperity Guardian" maritime security coalition has garnered support only from a handful of Western countries, while key Arab states including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt have all declined to participate. This stark divergence fully demonstrates that the United States' ability to rally regional support in the Middle East has waned considerably (Ye, 2026; Sun, 2026).

6.3.2. Rising Influence of Russia and China

Russia has established multi-level cooperative relations with countries such as Iran, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia through military and diplomatic means. China, for its part, has successfully facilitated the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and deepened cooperation with Middle Eastern countries in energy, trade, infrastructure and other fields, yielding fruitful results under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's neutral stance and constructive role have been widely recognized

by Middle Eastern countries.

6.3.3. Shift toward Independent Diplomacy by Regional States

The wars have made Middle Eastern countries acutely aware of the risks of over-reliance on external powers, prompting them to pursue diversified diplomatic strategies. While maintaining its alliance with the United States, Saudi Arabia has actively improved relations with Iran and strengthened cooperation with China and Russia. Türkiye has maintained a delicate balance between the United States and Russia. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have also flexibly adjusted their diplomatic policies in accordance with their national interests, no longer fully aligning with the United States.

6.3.4. Severe Setbacks to the Middle East Reconciliation Process

The regional reconciliation wave that emerged between 2021 and early 2023 came to an abrupt halt due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Saudi Arabia suspended normalization talks with Israel, and relations between Arab states and Israel have regressed comprehensively. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have also re-escalated over the Israeli-Palestinian issue, further complicating the regional security situation.

6.4. Social Dimension: Collapse of Livelihoods and Social Structures

6.4.1. Irreversible Changes in Demographic Structure

The deaths of large numbers of young and middle-aged men have caused a severe gender imbalance in the population, creating millions of orphans and widows and forcing women to become the primary breadwinners for their families. Mass population displacement has reshaped regional demographic distribution, with large numbers of people moving from rural to urban areas and from conflict zones to relatively safe regions. The wars have inflicted indelible psychological trauma on an entire generation.

6.4.2. Full Escalation of Social Contradictions

The wars have exacerbated class, sectarian and ethnic tensions. The wealth gap has widened further, with a small minority profiting from war profiteering while the majority of the population has fallen into poverty. Hatred between different sects and ethnic groups has deepened, intensifying social fragmentation. Within Israel, tensions between Jews and Arabs have reached unprecedented levels, with the government's discrimination and repression against Arab citizens becoming increasingly severe.

6.4.3. Resurgence of Extremism and Terrorism

Widespread despair caused by the wars has provided a fertile breeding ground for extremism. Remnants of the Islamic State (IS) have taken advantage of the situation to expand their operational scope, launching multiple terrorist attacks in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and other regions. A United Nations report has warned of a sig-

nificant risk of their resurgence. The protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict has also spawned new extremist groups, further threatening regional security.

6.4.4. Total Collapse of Education and Healthcare Systems

According to a statement from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in April 2025, approximately 88 percent of schools in the Gaza Strip require full reconstruction or major renovation (UNRWA, 2025), leaving over 630,000 children without access to formal education (UNRWA, 2025). An assessment published by the World Health Organization in May 2026 indicates over half of all healthcare facilities across the Gaza Strip are fully non-operational; merely 53 percent of hospitals and 58 percent of primary health clinics remain in partial operation due to acute shortages of medicines and essential medical supplies (WHO, 2026). According to 2025 data from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), over 2900 schools in Yemen have been destroyed, damaged or requisitioned for military use since 2015, leaving approximately 4.5 million school-age children out of school (UNICEF, 2025). A 2026 assessment published by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on Yemen notes that roughly 60 percent of the country's health facilities operate only partially, while nearly 40 percent are either limitedly functional or fully out of service; an estimated 19.3 million Yemenis lack access to essential basic healthcare services (OCHA, 2026a). The total collapse of education and healthcare systems will lead to the intergenerational transmission of poverty and protracted outbreaks of infectious diseases, severely constraining the long-term development of the Middle East.

7. Conclusion

The period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes the most turbulent transformative era in the modern history of the Middle East. A series of conflicts, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Yemeni War, and the regime change in Syria, have caused approximately 1.5 million deaths and displaced tens of millions of people, triggering the worst humanitarian disaster of the 21st century.

The wars have fundamentally reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The era of unipolar U.S. dominance has come to an end, and regional power has evolved toward multipolarity, with the roles of Russia and China in regional affairs becoming increasingly prominent. The Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" has suffered a devastating blow; the influence of Saudi Arabia and Türkiye has risen significantly; and Israel has consolidated its military superiority but experienced a collapse in its international image. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, and the complete breakdown of the consensus on unity among Arab states on the Israeli-Palestinian issue have further transformed the regional power structure.

The regional economy, diplomacy, and society have simultaneously sustained severe damage. Economic growth has slowed sharply, energy markets and global supply chains have experienced violent shocks, and the economic transformation

process of Gulf states has been interrupted. U.S. regional leadership has declined, prompting countries to shift toward independent and diversified diplomatic strategies. Demographic imbalances, the collapse of education and healthcare systems, intensified social contradictions, and the resurgence of extremism have created long-term challenges for regional development.

Since the end of 2025, the Middle East has entered a period of relative calm. However, the three root causes of conflicts—the core Israeli-Palestinian contradictions, sectarian hegemonic rivalry, and extra-regional power intervention—have not been eliminated, leaving the future situation highly uncertain. The international community should adhere to the United Nations’ two-state solution, respect the sovereignty of all countries, promote regional dialogue and cooperation and the reconstruction of the security architecture, and scale up humanitarian assistance to help the Middle East achieve long-term peace and stability.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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