



REGIONAL ASPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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Post-Bipolar Middle East: Moving from Conflicts to Sustainable Development in an Emerging Multipolar World

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Abstract. After the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations, the contemporary macro-region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) still encompasses more than two dozen states that differ in terms of their political regimes, economic models and levels of socio-economic development. The region also experiences a variety of conflicts, divided by type into interstate, internal, and hybrid with the participation of both states and non-state actors (NSA). Furthermore, these conflicts can be categorized as territorial, ideological, political, ethnic, religious, and economic, and can vary in intensity and degree of internationalization. The contradictory nature of MENA is manifested by the parallel genesis of the foci of sustainable development, which determine the interest of states in establishing long-lasting peace. This is correlated with the significant role of MENA as a transit point in global logistics projects, such as the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and the India — Middle East — Europe transport corridor. The uncertainty surrounding the political and military scenarios on which MENA countries depend highlights the importance of expert assessments and forecasts, which explains the relevance of the topic of the present study. The author sets out to prove the thesis that, despite the escalation of tensions and the failure of the US's attempts to “pacify” the region on a monetary basis, mostly taking into account the interests of Israel, but not other countries, the chances of avoiding a large-scale regional war remain. Facing the transition from the unipolar to a multipolar world, this could be linked to both the sovereignization of the foreign policies of MENA countries and the diplomacy of the new global centers of power, including Russia and China. Based on a wide range of Russian and foreign sources together with his own field research data, the author applies the principle of historicism using a systemic approach and analyzing processes in retrospective dynamics. The novelty of the research lies in the fact that the author, guided by the principle of the connection between theory and practice and turning to the theory of deeply divided societies (DDSs), introduces the concept of “deeply divided region” (DDR) into the scientific domain. The practical significance of the study is embodied by a few recommendations for implementing the 2023 Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.

Key words: system of international relations, countries of the Global South, deeply divided society, Arab Spring, internal conflict, internationalization of conflict, sovereignization of foreign policy, diversification of economy, 2023 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation

Conflicts of interest. The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Постбиполярный Ближний Восток: движение от конфликтов к устойчивому развитию в условиях формирующегося многополярного мира

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Аннотация. Современный макрорегион Ближнего Востока и Северной Африки (БВСА) и после распада биполярной системы международных отношений представляет собой пространство с более чем двумя десятками государств с различными политическими режимами, экономическими моделями, уровнями социально-экономического развития и целым рядом конфликтов, которые по типам делятся на межгосударственные, внутренние и гибридные с участием государств и негосударственных акторов (НГА), по видам — на территориальные, идеологические, политические, этнические, религиозные и экономические, а также отличаются по интенсивности и степени интернационализации. Противоречивость БВСА проявляется в параллельном генезисе очагов устойчивого развития, обуславливающих заинтересованность государств в установлении долгосрочного мира, что коррелирует с важным транзитным местом БВСА в глобальных логистических проектах, будь то китайская инициатива «Один пояс, один путь» или транспортный коридор «Индия — Ближний Восток — Европа». Отсутствие определенности в военно-политических сценариях, от которых зависит развитие стран БВСА, повышает значимость экспертных оценок и прогнозирования, чем объясняется актуальность темы исследования. Автор ставит перед собой задачу доказать тезис о том, что, несмотря на эскалацию напряженности и провал попыток США «умиротворить» регион на монетарной основе, учитывая преимущественно интересы Израиля, но не других стран, шансы избежать масштабной региональной войны остаются. При переходе от так до конца и не сложившегося однополярного мира к многополярности это связано с суверенизацией внешней политики стран БВСА и дипломатией новых глобальных центров силы, в частности России и Китая. С опорой на широкий пласт российских и зарубежных источников автор применяет принцип историзма и системный подход, анализируя процессы в динамике и в ретроспективе. Новизна исследования состоит в том, что, руководствуясь принципом связи теории и практики и обращаясь к теории глубоко разделенных обществ (ГРО), автор вводит в научный оборот понятие «глубоко разделенного региона» (ГРР). Практическая значимость исследования заключается в предложении ряда рекомендаций по реализации Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации 2023 г.

Ключевые слова: система международных отношений, страны Глобального Юга, глубоко разделенное общество, «арабская весна», внутренний конфликт, интернационализация конфликта, суверенизация внешней политики, диверсификация экономики, Концепция внешней политики РФ 2023 г.

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Примечание. Мнения, высказанные в статье, принадлежат автору и могут не совпадать с позицией редколлегии журнала.

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Introduction

The Middle East, in a broad perception of its historical-geographical space, includes the Arab

countries of West Asia and North Africa, as well as Israel, Iran, and Türkiye. After the end of World War II, the region became a macro-region

with numerous contradictions on different levels, despite the fact that the prerequisites for this had been present much earlier.

In the era of globalization, which is characterized by the growing interdependence of regions and countries, the collective West, trying to preserve its neocolonial access to the raw resources of the Arab and Islamic world, often uses in its own interests or provokes multiple conflicts in states with different political systems, levels of development, and economic models. As a result, various serious risks arise not only at the regional level, but also at the global level. This is fraught with an uncontrolled escalation of regional conflicts into transregional conflicts and, more broadly, into a WWII. Moreover, these risks include the possibility of blocking promising global projects such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the India — Middle East — Europe transport and logistics corridor, due to conflicts in Gaza and Yemen.

However, one cannot say that the Middle East remains aloof from positive trends. Not only Israel, the Western outpost, but also several other states in the region have been actively trying to build "economies of the 21st century," which reflects the genesis of foci of sustainable development.

Expert assessments and forecasts that take into account the balance of power at various levels, the dynamics and variability of changes, as well as the sustainability potentials of political regimes determine the effectiveness of implementing the tasks set out in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation.¹ Thus, the above mentioned justifies the relevance and practical significance of the topic of the present article.

The object of the study is a changing set of destructive and stabilizing factors that determine the political and socio-economic development and modernization of the Global South in the first third of the 21st century at the level of

societies, regional systems of international relations (SIRs), and economies. The subject of the study is the "conflict — peaceful development" dichotomy across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) macro-region.

Due to the lack of a single, internationally agreed definition of the borders of this region (all of the Geoschemes based on the United Nations (UN) M.49 standard and those adopted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund differ from each other), this study identifies the MENA macro-region as comprising the member states of the League of Arab States (LAS), excluding the Comoros, which are too remote to participate in the regional SIR, but also including Israel, which is involved in regional conflicts, as well as Iran and Türkiye, which are influential in regional affairs. Several MENA sub-regions are outlined, among them Maghreb, the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa region, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East,² and the sub-region of the Persian Gulf.

The purpose of the study is to test the hypothesis that, despite conflicting interests, there is still a chance to avoid a major war in the MENA macro-region, for example between Iran and its allies (non-state actors, NSAs) on the one hand, and Israel and the United States on the other, for a number of reasons:

- at the end of the 20th century, the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations caused the loss of interest of the MENA countries in participating in a block interstate confrontation for the sake of economic and financial dividends,

- the process of sovereignization of the foreign policies of the Global South states has begun, aiming at establishing a more just world order,

- the genesis of foci and zones of sustainable development is observed, forming the interest of states in a long-lasting peace, which, however, does not mean their abstention from regional rivalries,

¹ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (confirmed by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on March 31, 2023) // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. October 31, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/> (accessed: 17.11.2024).

² Here, the Middle East as *Srednij Vostok* (in Russian) encompasses Iran and Türkiye apart from the rest of MENA, i.e. Near East (in English) or *Blizhnij Vostok* (in Russian).

– MENA states have been looking for new forms and formats of integration and interaction between themselves and with new global centers of power. An example is constituted by the growing interest of the MENA countries in BRICS.

Materials and Research Methods

A systemic approach is employed to analyze the main aspects of the theory and history of international relations, as well as the development of SIRs at various levels, in the works of Russian scholars within the framework of Alexey Bogaturov's theoretical school (Vestnik RUDN. International Relations, 2020). Many surveys related to the theory of international conflicts, conflicts in the Middle East, and problems of socio-economic development in the region are reflected in the works of Russian and foreign authors, who in particular classified both conflicts (Glukhova, 2020) and the behavior of the parties involved (Sushentsov, 2010).

By character, conflicts are divided into fights, games, and debates (Rapoport, 1960), while by spatial scope they could be distinguished as global, regional, or local. Given the clash of interests and the struggle for spheres of influence and resources, as well as a high degree of internationalization, these conflicts become geopolitical. By nature, they are either interstate, internal, or hybrid. At the same time by type, they are also divided into territorial, political, ideological, ethnic, religious, and economic conflicts.

Aspects of the evolution of the Middle Eastern regional SIR are covered both in the works of Russian researchers (Yakovlev, 2020; Ryzhov, Borodina & Savicheva, 2021; Polyakov, 2023) and their foreign colleagues (Halliday, 2005; Hinnebusch, 2015).

Russian orientalist Vitaly Naumkin (2015) adapts Adrian Guelke's theoretical notion of a "deeply divided society" (Guelke, 2012) to MENA. Vitaly Naumkin together with Vasily Kuznetsov (Naumkin & Kuznetsov, 2020) also adapted here Phillip Taylor's typology of non-state actors (Taylor, 1984).

Konstantin Truevtsev analyzed the reasons for the "Arab Spring" and the "turbulence waves," which "shook up" the Arab world in 2011 and 2012–2018, respectively (Truevtsev, 2020). Monographs dedicated to the "Arab Spring" in the West include works by James Gelvin (2012) and Mark Haas (2017).

Trends and actors in the Middle East in the "post-bipolar period" are studied by Irina Zvyagelskaya (2017). There are also works covering the issues of the internationalization of conflicts (Lukyanov & Kuliyeva, 2024) and the challenge of Islamist terrorism (Issaev et al., 2020).

A vast body of research is devoted to the problems of modernization and integration of MENA states (Mamedova, 2016; Meliantsev & Amirov, 2018; Rudenko, 2016; Filonik, 2022), as well as the analysis of the dynamics and main characteristics of geopolitical, cultural, civilizational identities in the Middle East (Belov & Savicheva, 2021) and the overview of Russia's role in the region (Zvyagelskaya et al., 2021).

While the above-mentioned works analyze both conflicts and imperatives of sustainable development separately, in the present study they are viewed at together in relation to the Middle East, which makes it possible to demonstrate the region's increased contradictory character.

Methodologically, the current research is based on the following approaches and principles:

- a systemic approach, which implies preparing Geoschemes of both conflicts and foci / zones of sustainable development, analyzed through the prism of the regional SIR,
- an interdisciplinary approach,
- the principle of the unity of theory and practice, which allows the author to provide his assessment of pieces of world news about the Middle East, which often appear to be contradictory. Thus, it makes possible to make reasonable conclusions about their real implications and content.

The set of research methods includes classification, comparative analysis, and the use of elements of the visualization of data

methodology with their presentation in infographic objects that is easy to understand.

Deeply Divided Societies

The MENA macro-region hosts deeply divided societies. According to Vitaly Naumkin, these include Iraq and Syria, as well as Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, and Libya (Naumkin, 2015, p. 67). In our opinion, clear signs of DDS could be found in Bahrain, Djibouti, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, and Türkiye (Figure 1).

In Maghreb, DDSs have been formed within the culturally complex societies of Algeria, Libya, and Mauritania. Despite certain signs of DDS in Morocco and Tunisia, inspired by the wealth inequality (not coincidentally, the “Arab spring” originated in Tunisia), in the first case, the authorities manage to prevent the polarization of society through paternalism and the use of external aid, while in the second case they control the situation by making both political concessions to citizens

and encouraging dialogue between social groupings.

For a long time, the main binary contradiction in Algeria was embodied by the political and ideological conflict between the authorities and the Islamists, which developed into armed clashes in 1992–2002. Now, the fighting has mostly ceased. However, ethnic tensions between Arabs and the Kabyle people (Berbers) persist.

The main DDS’s feature in Libya became linked with the multilevel divisions, developed during the colonial and monarchical periods, then under Muammar Gaddafi and after the fall of his regime in 2011. The first level is represented by regionalism (*iqlimiya* in Arabic), i.e. the division into the regions of Cyrenaica in the west, Tripolitania in the east, and Fezzan in the southwest. The second level is represented by the ethnical divisions between Arabs, Berbers, and Tuaregs (Berber group). The third level is related to both tribalism (*qabiliya*) and family-clannish divisions.

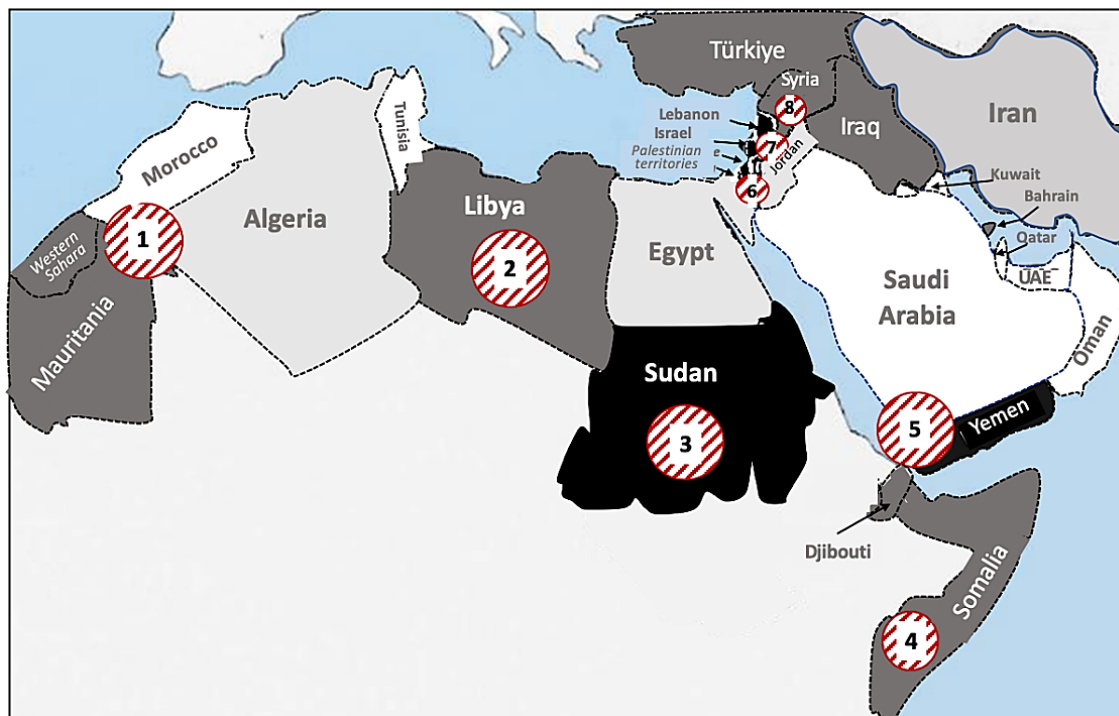


Figure 1. Conflicts in the MENA Macro-region:

countries (or territories) in a hot phase of conflict are highlighted in black; countries with armed conflicts that tend to escalate or de-escalate and countries with profound signs of DDS are highlighted in dark gray; countries with signs of DDS are highlighted in light gray. Conflict zones are marked with strokes

Source: compiled by I.A. Matveev.

The overthrow of Gaddafi, who had been trying hard to maintain a balance between the tribes, led to a sharp increase in the influence of the clan system (Makhmutova, 2022, p. 363).

In the Mauritanian DDS, the main binary confrontation line is embodied by the first level racial and ethnic division between the Negroid population of the South and the Tuareg / Arab-Berber populations of the North, oriented respectively towards West Africa and the Arab world (Grishina, 2021, pp. 60–61). Meanwhile, the second level tribal contradictions explain frequent military coups³ (namely, the unsuccessful coup of 2003 and the coups of 2005 and 2008).

In the Red Sea / Horn of Africa region, the DDSs have developed in all five countries. In Egypt, since Anwar Sadat's times, the signs of DDS have been attributed to the antagonisms between compradors and the conservatives, sympathizing to the Muslim Brotherhood⁴ movement, including ideological supporters of the archaization of Islam together with religiously addicted poor urban and rural residents.

Less severe antagonisms are related to the religious division between Muslims and Coptic Christians, as well as the ethnic Nubian issue. The “Arab Spring” protests led to the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, who had been staying in power since 1981, and the 2012 subsequent election of Mohammed Morsi, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, in 2012. At the same time, the special role of the Egyptian military, who see themselves as a guarantor of national integrity, has remained a stabilizing factor since the 1952 “July Revolution” (Ibragimov, 2019, p. 73). In 2013, after ousting Morsi, they appointed General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as the head of state.

³ Berg I. S. Interethnic Conflicts in Mauritania in the Light of Military Coups (1978–2008) // The Institute of Middle East. October 25, 2009. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=9537> (accessed: 18.11.2024).

⁴ Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

Colonial Djibouti witnessed the genesis of a DDS, driven by the division between two peoples, namely, the Afar and the Issa. During the 1967 referendum, the Afar voted for maintaining the status of an overseas territory of France, while the representatives of the Issa ethnic group, belonging to the Somalian Dir tribe supported joining Somalia. After gaining independence in 1977, the country became headed by Hassan Aptidon, a native of Issa, who was replaced in 1999 by own nephew, the current president of the country, Ismail Guelleh. In 1991, a war broke out between the government and the Afar Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy, which ended in 1994 by the victory of the Issa. So far, the authorities have managed to control the situation by Islamizing society and attracting external assistance. Thus, China is offered profitable investment projects, particularly those related to the seaport of Djibouti (Ponomarenko & Piskunov, 2022, p. 162).

In Yemen, the tribal strife is intertwined with the division between the Sunnis and Zaydi Shi'a Muslims, which correlates with the historical division of the country into North and South. A significant part of the Zaydis has been supporting the Houthis political movement. Hence, the Yemeni elites lean towards different external actors: the Houthis in the north on Iran,⁵ the internationally recognized authorities temporarily based in the south in Aden on Saudi Arabia, and the Southern Transitional Council on the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁶ There are also Islamists (in 2014, the “Wilayat Al-Yaman” was

⁵ Gelman Z. The 21st Century and the Tribal State // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. July 26, 2019. (In Russian). URL: https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2019-07-26/1_1054_yemen.html (accessed: 22.07.2025).

⁶ See: Ryabov P. P. Yemen: Disagreements Between KSA and UAE Have Effectively Destroyed the Arabian Coalition Against the Houthis // The Institute of Middle East. May 31, 2017. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.iimes.ru/?p=35220> (accessed: 22.07.2025); Subbotin I. Yemen Conflict Sets Riyadh and Abu Dhabi at Odds // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. April 26, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20200501202506/http://www.ng.ru/world/2020-04-26/2_7853_yemen.html (accessed: 22.07.2025).

proclaimed within the structure of the “Islamic State”⁷).

An example of a profound DDS exists in Somalia, characterized by a conglomerate of intersecting and parallel dividing lines. The first, regional level relates to the colonial division of the country into British Somaliland, which is currently Somaliland, not recognized as a state, but with own economy and currency, and Italian Somaliland, nowadays the Federal Republic of Somalia, which de jure consists of the regions of Jubaland, Puntland, Hirshabelle, the South West State of Somalia, and the State of Central Somalia. The second level is formed by the ethnic division between Somalis and non-Somalis (Bantu, Ethiopian, etc.). The third level is represented by the division between tribal unions and clans (Darod, Dir, Isaaq, Hawiye, Rahanweyn), as well as into sub clans (Demidov, 2023, p. 199) and family-clannish groups. Not by chance, Somalia is often referred to as a country of “clannish federalism” (Issaev & Bobarykina, 2023, p. 248). Separately, it is worth mentioning the ongoing war between the government in Mogadishu and the local authorities, on the one hand, and the Islamists from Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (Al-Shabaab), on the other.

In Sudan, the 2011 split into the Caucasian Arab-Muslim North and the Negroid Christian-animist South partially lowered down the interracial and religious contradictions. The Darfur ethnic conflict of 2003–2020 was also muted. However, in 2023, a power struggle between the army elite and the field commanders of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) sparked a domestic political conflict.

Signs of DDS could be found in all countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East (*Srednij Vostok* in Russian), including Israel with its political polarization under a multi-party system, which reflects, among other things the division by a degree of religious addiction of the population (there are orthodox parties). Additionally, there is an

ethnical-religious division between Jews, Muslim Israeli Arabs as citizens of Israel, and Druze, which has not yet acquired an antagonistic character due to the integration of the latter into the society. At the same time, Israeli society is capable of consolidating in the face of conflict with Palestinians, as well as terrorist and external threats, once again becoming united during the war against Hamas.

A complicated situation has developed in Jordan, whereas the DDS’s divisions are associated with the presence of 2 million Palestinian refugees and 1.4 million Syrian refugees (data for 2024).⁸ Unlike the Palestinians, who had managed to integrate themselves into society, the inflow of Syrians put a heavy burden on the economy. As fearing an internal conflict, the authorities object to a new influx of Palestinian refugees caused by the war in Gaza, not forgetting the “Black September” of 1970, when thousands of Palestinian militants almost overthrew King Hussein. In addition, the tribal-clannish structure of the society remains, the toxic effect of which is leveled by the discourse of paternalism.

The multi-component Iraqi society still witnesses a binary ethnic division between Arabs and Kurds along with the confessional division between Sunnis and Shi‘ites which form a ternary division not typical for most DDSs (Guelke, 2012, p. 14). This is reflected by informal quotas for government posts (*Muhasasa taifiya*) and recruiting elite (Mamedov & Sapronova, 2021, pp. 364–365): according to the political arrangements of 2003, the President of the country must be a Sunni Kurd, while the Prime Minister must be a Shi‘ite Arab and the Speaker of Parliament must be a Sunni Arab.⁹

In Iran, a key indicator of division applicable to a DDS is belonging to the conservative or reformist camp. For example, the current President, Masoud Pezeshkian, is

⁷ Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

⁸ Where We Work: Jordan // Anera. 2024. URL: <https://www.anera.org/where-we-work/jordan/> (accessed 18.11.2024).

⁹ Belenkaya M. Iraq Is Left Without a President // Kommersant. February 8, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5205612> (accessed: 06.08.2025). (In Russian).

considered a reformer, whereas his predecessor, Ebrahim Raisi, who died in a plane crash, was considered a conservative. Many Iranians, especially young people have got critical attitudes towards the authorities. In 2021–2023, these attitudes inspired mass protests several times. However, a consolidating factor remains linked with the “besieged fortress syndrome,” due to the confrontation with Israel.

The DDS in Lebanon consists of a number of confessional division lines (*taifiya*), including those between Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shi‘a Muslims, and Druze, which due to the uniqueness of Lebanon have acquired rather network-like character rather than being binary or ternary. While the Maronites are oriented towards the West, the Sunnis lean for the West and Arabian monarchies,¹⁰ with the local Shi‘ites are largely sympathetic to Iran. The National Pact of 1943 ensured a shaky balance by assigning the post of President of the country to the Maronites, the post of Prime Minister to the Sunnis, and the post of Chairman of Parliament to the Shi‘ites. Another independent factor has become linked with the presence of refugees: in 1975, the conflict between the Palestinians, who had established “a state within a state” in Southern Lebanon, and the Maronites kindled a 15-year civil war. Now, the history partly reiterates with the Shi‘ite Hezbollah movement, which has not only established control over the South, but has also integrated itself into society, since 1992, being represented both in parliament and the economy (Makhmutova, 2020, p. 83). The religious division lines have been overlapping other antagonisms, such as those between Muslim Arabs and a part of local Christians, who despite their Arab ethnicity call themselves “Levantines” by analogy with the Catholics of the medieval states established by the Crusaders in the Middle East.

For the DDS at the Palestinian territories, the main thing is about the binary political and

ideological contradiction between the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) and the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). In 2007, Hamas gained control of Gaza while Fatah kept the West Bank. Remarkably, the war in Gaza consolidated the “Palestinian street,” but not the elite.

The presence of binary division lines in Syria has become one of the reasons for the internal conflict. They include political antagonisms between opponents and supporters of former President Bashar al-Assad, ideological antagonisms between Islamists and the rest of the population, ethnic antagonisms between Arabs and Kurds, and confessional antagonisms between both Sunnis and Shi‘ites and Sunnis and the Alawite community, to which the Assad family belonged, ruling Syria in 1970–2024. Unlike in Iraq, the binary divisions in Syria did not become ternary, although sometimes overlapping each other. An example is represented by the mutual political and ideological conflict between the radicals of the Islamic State (banned in Russia) and Jabhat al-Nusra,¹¹ as well as their conflicts with the authorities, as well as moderate and secular opposition.

A clear sign of DDS in Türkiye is related with the irreconcilable political and ideological split of society. The presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections of 2023–2024 demonstrated the orientation of one half of society towards Islamic values and neo-Ottomanism, versus the other half’s orientation towards a rapprochement with the West and secular ideals. While the interests of the first group are defended by the Justice and Development Party, staying in power since 2002 and headed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the supporters of the second group have gathered around the Republican People’s Party, which was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

¹⁰ From here on, the notion of Arabian monarchies refers to the six countries that are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These are: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

¹¹ Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

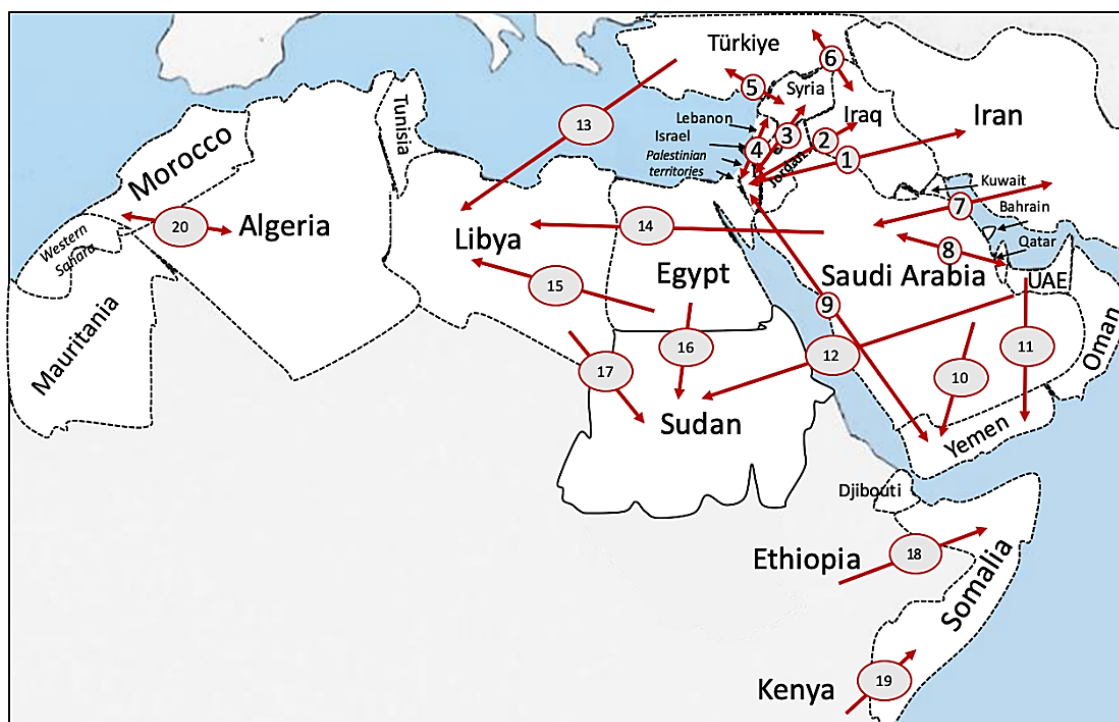


Figure 2. Conflict lines involving regional actors in the MENA macroregion (excluding the vectors of influence related to non-regional actors):

the number of conflict lines is shown in circles. A line with one arrow indicates a one-way vector of the conflict line, and a line with two arrows indicates a two-way direction.

Source: compiled by I.A. Matveev.

The peak of the confrontation occurred when the Turkish military conducted a failed coup d'état in 2016. There are also tensions between Turks and Kurds, with the latter forming the largest ethnic minority (21% as of 2019) (Philippova, 2020, p. 102). However, the authorities still recognize neither Kurds as a separate ethnic group nor the Kurdish language. In 1984–2025, there was an armed conflict between the authorities and the supporters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party¹² in Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria. These contradictions correlate with the political and ideological ones, forming a ternary division, due to which during the presidential elections of 2024 the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party supported the opposition candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu¹³. Additionally,

the anti-Syrian pogroms that happened in Türkiye on June 30, 2024, highlighted the sharpness of ethnic tensions between the Turks and the Syrians.

The sub-region of the Persian Gulf looks relatively calm. Out of the six monarchies pronounced signs of DDS are observed only in Bahrain by a binary division line into the Shi'a majority of the population and the Sunni elite headed by the ruling Al Khalifa family. In 2011, this division provoked an outbreak of protests in the wave of the "Arab Spring," which were suppressed by the military and security forces from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Open Conflicts

Remarkably, the conflicts that differ from each other in terms of type, character, degree of intensity, and internationalization pose a more serious challenge for MENA than DDSs. (Figure 2).

¹² In March 2025, the Party announced an end to its armed struggle against the Turkish state. In May, it announced its self-dissolution (*Editor's note*).

¹³ Zainashev Yu. Kurdish Reserves Have Become A Main Threat to Erdogan // *Vzglyad: Business Newspaper*. May 26, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://vz.ru/amp/world/2023/5/26/1213551.html> (accessed: 18.11.2024).

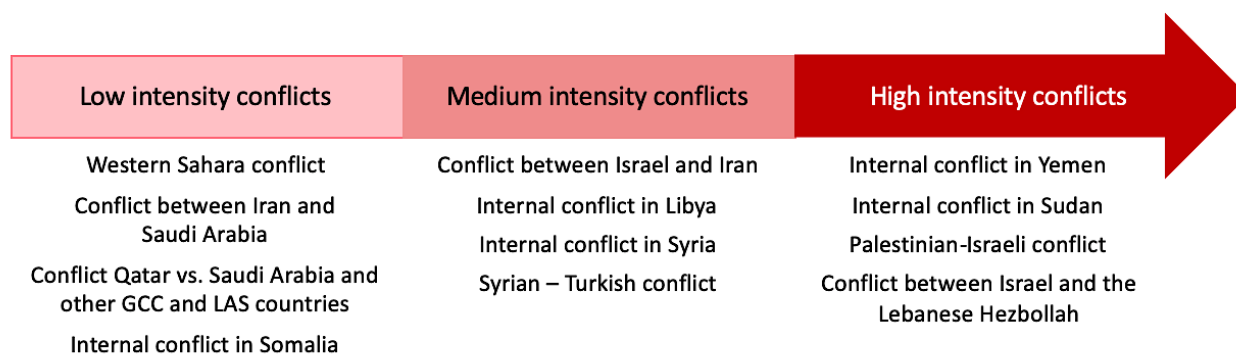


Figure 3. Conflict Intensity Scale

Source: compiled by I.A. Matveev.



Figure 4. Conflict Internationalization Scale

Source: compiled by I.A. Matveev.

There are two conflicts in Maghreb.

The first, the Western Sahara conflict, ongoing since the 1970s is a territorial and hybrid political conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front. Since 1992, it has been characterized by low intensity (see the scale in Figure 3) and internationalization (see the scale in Figure 4). The Polisario Front has sought maximum international recognition for the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, although outbreaks of fighting have continued, as in 2020.¹⁴ Algeria keeps supporting the Western Sahara rebels, thus, remaining in a state of confrontation with Morocco¹⁵ (see zone 1 in Figure 1 and line 20 in Figure 2).

¹⁴ Mustafin R. Western Sahara Balances on the Brink of War // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. November 16, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://www.ng.ru/world/2020-11-16/6_8015_sahara.html (accessed: 22.07.2025).

¹⁵ What Will the Worsening Relations Between France and Algeria Lead To? The Reason for It Was Paris's

The second conflict is the Libyan one. During the external intervention and civil war in Libya, a dual power rivalry emerged between the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli and the Government of National Stability (GNS), and before that the Interim Government in Sirte. It is a political conflict with the ethno-tribal and economic components (zone 2 in Figure 1), which is characterized by moderate intensity (there were no active hostilities in 2020–2021, but clashes resumed in 2022), with a high degree of internationalization. While the GNU is recognized by the United Nations and supported Türkiye and Qatar (line 13 in Figure 2), the GNS is backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia (lines 14 and 15 in Figure 2).

The Red Sea / Horn of Africa region is witnessing three hot conflicts.

Position on Western Sahara // RBK. August 17, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/08/2024/66bf5ee69a79475b71fd5e89> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

The civil war in Yemen (zone 5 in Figure 1) is an internal conflict involving antagonism between the internationally recognized government and the NSA, which is represented by the Houthis, southerners, tribes, and Islamists, having the features of hybrid conflict, if we take into account the clashes between the Houthis and Western powers. There is also a political and ideological confrontation between Islamists and other actors. The conflict remains highly intense with a tendency to escalate amid the war in Gaza. Highly internationalized events include the military confrontation between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia (line 10 in Figure 2), along with the support of the Yemeni southerners by the UAE (line 11 in Figure 2), the ongoing since December 2023 US's military operation against the Houthis, and the exchange of strikes between the Houthis and Israel (line 9 in Figure 2).

The Somali civil war, which has been ongoing since 1988 (zone 4 in Figure 1), is a multi-level internal conflict between the federal authorities, local authorities, and the NSA with the signs of political, territorial (the Puntland vs. Somaliland dispute), ideological, economic, and ethnic conflicts. Although the intensity of this conflict is currently low, the central authorities, together with the United States, continue operations against Al-Shabaab. The conflict also remains highly internationalized, which brings to mind the territorial dispute between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden region (Grigorieva & Miheev, 2022, p. 18) (line 18 in Figure 2) and Kenya's "Linda Nchi" military operation in southern Somalia in 2011–2012¹⁶ (line 19 in Figure 2). There is also a Turkish military presence in the form of the TÜRK SOM training camp in Mogadishu,¹⁷ and UAE — Somaliland relations in the form of the Berbera military base project.¹⁸

¹⁶ Aleinikov S. V. On the Progress of the Kenyan Armed Forces Operation in Somalia // The Institute of Middle East. October 25, 2011. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=13515> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

¹⁷ Orlov A. S. On the Escalation of Anti-Turkish Sentiments Among al-Shabaab Militants in Somalia // The Institute of Middle East. April 13, 2022. (In Russian). URL: https://www.iimes.ru/?p=85142#_edn2 (accessed: 22.07.2025).

¹⁸ Subbotin I. Israel Shows Interest in a Military Base in the Horn of Africa // *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. August 5,

Sudan continues to suffer from an intense internal political conflict between the army command and the RSF (zone 3 in Figure 1). While not affecting freedom of navigation in the Red Sea as the Yemeni conflict does, it has acquired a moderate degree of internationalization. As Egypt backs the Sudanese government and the army (line 16 in Figure 2), the Libyan National Army of Khalifa Haftar and the UAE support the RSF¹⁹ (lines 12 and 17 in Figure 2).

A highly intensive hybrid conflict between the State of Israel and the Palestinians is regarded as the longest-running conflict, lasting for more than 75 years (zone 6 in Figure 1). It could be classified as territorial (due to Israel's resistance to Palestinian attempts to establish their own state), ethnic (due to antagonism between Arabs and Jews), religious (due to the struggle for Jerusalem as a holy city for Muslims and Jews), and ideological conflict, given the largely persistent perception of Israel in the Islamic world as a "Zionist enemy."

Due to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, the conflict has become even more intense (Figure 3) and more internationalized (Figure 4). Israel's actions were condemned not only by the Global South, but also within the EU.²⁰ On November 11, 2023 and November 11, 2024, respectively, Riyadh hosted the first and the second summits of the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), dedicated to the events in Gaza. On November 13, 2024, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan confirmed the severance

2024. (In Russian). URL: https://www.ng.ru/world/2024-08-05/2_9064_israel.html (accessed: 22.07.2025).

¹⁹ See: Kopytsev I. Foreign Policy Projection of the Conflict in Sudan: Neighbors // *New Eastern Outlook*. May 24, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://journal-neo.su/ru/2024/05/24/vneshnepoliticheskaya-proekciya-konflikta-v-sudane-sosedi/> (accessed: 22.07.2025); International Court Hearings: Sudan Accuses UAE of Involvement in Genocide // *UN News*. April 10, 2025. (In Russian). URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2025/04/1463206> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

²⁰ Galoyan G. The European Union Has Prepared Sanctions Against Israel Because of the Military Operation in Gaza // *Gazeta.RU*. July 5, 2025. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2025/07/05/26201804.shtml> (accessed: 07.07.2025).

of relations with Israel,²¹ while the United States continued to support the Israelis, in particular by vetoing anti-Israel resolutions in the UN Security Council.²² So far, it is not yet possible to predict whether the arrangement reached on January 15, 2025 with the diplomatic assistance of the United States, Egypt, and Qatar for a three-stage ceasefire to be established between Israel and Hamas (which entered into force on January 19, initially for a 42-day period²³) could end the war in Gaza.

In our view, the most dangerous axis of confrontation relating to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict lies between Israel and Iran with the latter's allies of the "axis of resistance." These include the Yemeni Houthis, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the umbrella structures of the "Popular Mobilization Forces" in Iraq, although weakened during the war in Gaza (2023–2024),²⁴ as well as the Iranian proxies in Syria before the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 (lines 1, 2, and 3 in Figure 2). This confrontation constitutes a medium-intensity, ideologically-driven interstate conflict (Iran does not recognize Israel) with international ramifications. Remarkably, the Israelis, despite their dependence on Washington, here, prefer to act independently.

Despite Israel's hostile actions in 2024 (the attack on the Iranian Consulate in Damascus,²⁵

the assassination of the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran,²⁶ etc.), Tehran hasn't abandoned the doctrine of "strategic patience,"²⁷ limiting itself to demonstrative strikes on Israeli territory. The Iranian authorities have therefore been trying to avoid escalating the conflict in the Middle East into a large-scale war,²⁸ which could affect the national economy, which is already under sanctions.²⁹ However, we believe that there is still a chance that the confrontation could escalate into an open conflict, particularly if the US increases its military presence in the Middle East under Donald Trump.

A dangerous consequence of the war in Gaza is the new round of hybrid and ideological armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah (zone 7 in Figure 1, line 4 in Figure 2), whereas on September 23, 2024, the IDF launched Operation "Northern Arrows" against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Until the end of 2024, the conflict had been characterized by high intensity (Figure 3) with a tendency to escalate. There was also a moderate degree of internationalization (Figure 4), with Iran largely remaining behind Hezbollah versus the Israelis, who often took independent steps, albeit not without looking back at the US. Due to the unknown outcome of the Iran-Israel standoff, it is still unclear how long the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, brokered by the United States and France and being in force since November 27, 2024, initially for a 60-day period,³⁰ will last.

²¹ Türkiye Has Severed Relations with Israel // RIA Novosti. November 13, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://ria.ru/20241113/turtsija-1983518724.html> (accessed: 18.11.2024).

²² A Review of Resolutions Vetoed by the US in Support of the Zionist Regime // Pars Today. November 24, 2024. (In Russian). URL: https://parstoday.ir/ru/news/world-i206294-Обзор_резолюций_на_которые_США_наложили_вето_в_поддержку_сионистского_режима (accessed: 07.06.2025).

²³ Israeli Government Approves a Ceasefire Deal with Hamas // RBK. January 18, 2025. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/18/01/2025/678ae5e99a7947c5e14b10c8> (accessed: 24.01.2025).

²⁴ The Popular Mobilization Forces include not only pro-Iranian militias but also nationalist groups (both Sunni and Shi'a) who oppose Iraq's too close cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran (*Editor's note*).

²⁵ What Is Known about the Israeli Strike on the Iranian Consulate in Syria // TASS. April 2, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/20415991> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

²⁶ What Consequences Could the Assassination of Hamas Politburo's Head Haniyeh Have? // RBK. July 31, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/31/07/2024/66aa30939a79477d7a90aa11> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

²⁷ Experts Explained the Origins of Iran's "Strategic Patience": How the Conflict with Israel Would End // Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS. October 5, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://ivran.ru/ivran-v-smi?artid=219666> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

²⁸ Iran Warned the US about the Risk of a Big War in the Middle East // RBK. November 17, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/11/2023/6557487e9a79473f939f3eab> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

²⁹ Nemtyrev M. Iran Between War and Deal // Vedomosti. February 10, 2025. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2025/02/10/1090950-iran-mezhdu-voinoi> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

³⁰ Coote D., Godfrey P. Israel — Hezbollah Cease-Fire: Displaced Lebanese Begin to Head Home as Guns, Bombs

By structure, the conflict in Syria remains the most complex in the MENA macro-region (zone 8 in Figure 1). Initially, it was determined by the struggle between the supporters of the regime of Bashar al-Assad overthrown in December 2024 and the opposition forces, ranging from secular groups and Kurdish separatists to Islamists. The Syrian conflict could be identified as an internal political conflict involving confessional, ethnic, economic, and ideological antagonisms. After the 2016–2018 victories won by the forces of Bashar al-Assad and allies, the intensity of the conflict decreased, with the localization of warfare in the north, northeast, northwest, and the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor. However, despite the apparent stabilization, there were more terrorist attacks, including the drone attack on the Homs Military Academy on October 5, 2023, or the attacks by Islamic State (banned in Russia) militants from the Syrian desert. Besides, tensions persisted in the southern province of Al-Suwayda, where the local Druze protested against deteriorating living standards.³¹

Throughout its development, the conflict in Syria has been characterized by a very high degree of internationalization. This is evident in the military and political presence of Russia and Iran approved by the authorities, the parallel deployment of Turkish and American military personnel without the consent of Damascus, and Western sanctions against Syria. A clear manifestation of such internationalization was represented by the interstate conflict between Syria and Türkiye (line 5 in Figure 2), which was characterized by both sporadic fighting between their regular armies (for example, during the Syrian military operation “Dawn of Idlib – 2” in December 2019 — March 2020) and the permanent hybrid conflict between Ankara and

the Syrian Kurds militias. Overtime, the intensity of this conflict has decreased. In contrast to 2015–2022, when Türkiye carried out six military operations, occupying the north of Syria,³² in 2023–2024, the Turks launched only targeted attacks on Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq³³ (line 6 in Figure 2). Moreover, in May 2023, at a meeting of the Quartet of foreign ministers of Russia, Syria, Iran, and Türkiye in Moscow, a roadmap for normalization of the Syrian-Turkish relations was announced³⁴. However, in our opinion, it was Türkiye’s undisclosed military and technical support for the 11-day *blitzkrieg* of anti-Assad forces³⁵ in late November — early December 2024 that led to such rapid fall of Assad’s regime.

Although there are no open conflicts in the Persian Gulf sub-region, this does not mean that there are no disagreements between the states. The main issue is the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional leadership, which is ideologically based on the division of Muslims into Sunnis and Shi’ites (line 7 in Figure 2). The conflict between Tehran and Riyadh is regarded as an interstate one with ideological, confessional, and political components. In 2023, in Beijing, both sides declared their readiness for a rapprochement.³⁶ At present, the degree of

Fall Silent // UPI. November 27, 2024. URL: https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2024/11/27/lebanon-cease-fire-begins/3361732695775 (accessed: 24.01.2025).

³¹ Semenov K. V. Is Syria Approaching a New “Arab Spring?” // The Russian International Affairs Council. September 8, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/siriya-priblizhaetsya-k-novoy-arabskoy-vesne/> (accessed: 18.11.2024).

³² See: History of Türkiye’s Military Operations in Syria // TASS. October 9, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/info/6981077> (accessed: 22.07.2025); Agaev M. A. Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Türkiye’s Military Operations as a Factor of the Growth of the Rating of the Ruling Party // The Institute of Middle East. November 27, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.iimes.ru/?p=92173> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

³³ Turkish Air Force Strikes PKK Targets in Iraq and Syria // Smotrim.ru. October 24, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://smotrim.ru/article/4187372> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

³⁴ The Heads of the Foreign Ministries of Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and Syria Met in Moscow // Channel One — News. May 14, 2023. (In Russian). URL: https://www.1tv.ru/news/2023-05-14/453056-v_moskve_vstretilis_glavy_mid_rossii_turtsii_irana_i_sirii (accessed: 22.07.2025).

³⁵ Ivanova M. Bloomberg: Erdoğan Strengthened Türkiye’s Influence After Assad’s Fall // Vzglad Business Newspaper. December 10, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://vz.ru/news/2024/12/10/1302584.html> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

³⁶ Shcheglov Yu. B. On the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

internationalization of this conflict remains low, limited mainly to the involvement of China.

Another interstate political conflict is related to the rivalry between Qatar, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other (line 8 of Figure 2). In 2017–2021, it caused a sharp crisis, when Bahrain, Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and several other countries cut their ties with Qatar. At the moment, the crisis has already been resolved. However, Qatar and Saudi Arabia hold opposing positions both in the Libyan conflict and towards Hamas. Since 2012, the political wing of the Hamas movement had been based in Doha, but in November 2024, the Qatari authorities asked its leaders to leave the country.³⁷ Interestingly, the internationalization of the Qatari diplomatic crisis remained moderate even at its peak, barely affecting non-regional powers.

Foci and Zones of Sustainable Development

Most countries in the Middle East have developed plans for modernizing their economies following the catch-up development paradigm. Unlike the East Asian model of economic growth, which is based on creating new niches in the global economy, its essence is to overcome backwardness through import substitution and diversification of national economies. Israel's innovation economy, developed with the help of the United States, makes an exception.

The modernization imperatives align with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), approved by the UN General Assembly on September 25, 2015, for the period up to 2030. For MENA, the SDGs related to poverty eradication, food security, and rational use of water resources have traditionally been important.³⁸ However, since the beginning of the

21st century, the growing imbalance in development levels has led to a division between the states with DDSs and conflicts that face survival challenges, and more stable countries with the ambitious aspirations for an accelerated creation of “21st-century economies.” The latter circumstance leads to the genesis of foci of sustainable development (FSD) encompassing the territories of individual countries, and zones of sustainable development (ZSD), which comprise in a single space a number of states with friendly or at least non-confrontational bilateral relations (cross-border zone) or separately several states with complex bilateral relations (sub-regional zone).

This trend is important as it is the reason for a radical reformatting of national interests. If we take A. B. Rapoport's classification (Rapoport, 1960, p. viii), prosperous states move from the conflicts-fights aimed to destroy an enemy for the survival to the games to gain leadership in rivalry (but not in war), and afterwards to disputes with the elimination of their disagreements through cooperation and integration, even if it requires reconciliation with the enemy, such as Israel.

For the purpose of the present study, two scales are used to determine FSD and ZSDs. The first is the “Ranking of Countries by Meeting the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals” (hereinafter — R1) (Table 1).

In order to correct the distortions caused by the differences in Western and Islamic assessments of the SDGs related to the inclusiveness of education, gender equality, and reducing inequality within and between countries³⁹ (for example, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies have been implementing the “state for own citizens” model, which reduces ranking positions in R1), the “Global Innovation Index” is also used (hereinafter referred to as R2), which shows the scale of implementation of innovations in the economy (Table 2).

Through the Mediation of China // The Institute of Middle East. March 13, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.iimes.ru/?p=95832> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

³⁷ FT: Qatar Asked Hamas Leaders to Leave the Country Under the US's Pressure // TASS. November 9, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/22357583> (accessed: 22.07.2025).

³⁸ List of goals 1, 2, and 6. See: 17 SDGs // United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs —

Sustainable Development. (In Russian). URL: <https://sdgs.un.org/ru/goals> (accessed: 17.11.2024).

³⁹ List of goals 4, 5, and 10. See: 17 SDGs // United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs — Sustainable Development. (In Russian). URL: <https://sdgs.un.org/ru/goals> (accessed: 17.11.2024).

Table 1. Ranking of Countries That Meet the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals

No.	Country	2020			2024		
		Number of points (out of 100)	World ranking place (out of 166)	Place in the Middle East	Number of points (out of 100)	The world ranking place (out of 167)	Place in the Middle East
1	Israel	74.6	40	1	73.53	↓ 53	1
2	Tunisia	71.4	63	4	72.53	↑ 60	2
3	Morocco	71.3	64	5	70.85	↓ 69	3
4	UAE	70.3	71	7	70.52	↑ 70	4
5	Algeria	72.3	56	2	70.47	↓ 71	5
6	Türkiye	70.3	70	6	70.47	↓ 72	6
7	Egypt	68.8	83	10	69.15	→ 83	7
8	Jordan	68.1	89	11	69.06	↑ 85	8
9	Iran	71.8	59	3	68.96	↓ 86	9
10	Oman	69.7	76	8	66.11	↓ 100	10
11	Qatar	64.7	103	14	64.93	↑ 102	11
12	Saudi Arabia	65.8	97	13	64.91	↓ 103	12
13	Iraq	63.1	113	16	64.18	↑ 108	13
14	Lebanon	66.7	95	12	63.89	↓ 110	14
15	Kuwait	63.1	112	15	63.76	↑ 111	15
16	Bahrain	68.8	82	9	63.56	↓ 113	16

Source: compiled by I.A. Matveev on the basis of: Sachs J., Schmidt-Traub G., Kroll C., Lafortune G., Fuller G., Woelm F. Sustainable Development Report 2020: The Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2020. P. 26–27. URL: https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2020/2020_sustainable_development_report.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2025); Sachs J., Lafortune G., Fuller G. Sustainable Development Report 2024 : The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Dublin : Dublin University Press, 2024. P. 20–21. URL: <https://files.unsdsn.org/sustainable-development-report-2024.pdf> (accessed: 01.04.2025).

Table 2. Global Innovation Index for 2020 and 2024

No.	Country	2020			2024		
		Number of points (out of 100)	Place in the world ranking (out of 133)	Place in the Middle East	Number of points (out of 100)	Place in the world ranking (out of 133)	Place in the middle East
1	Israel	53.55	13	1	52.7	↓ 15	1
2	UAE	41.79	34	2	42.8	↑ 32	2
3	Türkiye	34.90	51	3	39.0	↑ 37	3
4	Saudi Arabia	30.94	66	5	33.9	↑ 47	4
5	Qatar	30.81	70	7	32.9	↑ 49	5
6	Iran	30.89	67	6	28.9	↑ 64	6
7	Morocco	28.97	75	8	28.8	↑ 66	7
8	Kuwait	28.40	78	9	28.1	↑ 71	8
9	Bahrain	28.37	79	10	27.6	↑ 72	9
10	Jordan	27.79	81	11	27.5	↑ 73	10
11	Oman	26.50	84	12	27.1	↑ 74	11
12	Tunisia	31.21	65	4	25.4	↓ 81	12
13	Egypt	24.23	96	14	23.7	↑ 86	13
14	Lebanon	26.02	87	13	21.5	↓ 94	14
15	Algeria	19.48	121	15	16.2	↑ 115	15

Source: compiled by I. A. Matveev on the basis of: Global Innovation Index 2020 : Who Will Finance Innovation? : 13th edition / ed. by S. Dutta, B. Lanvin, S. Wunsch-Vincent. Geneva : Cornell University, INSEAD, WIPO, 2020. P. xxxii–xxxiii. URL: https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo_pub_gii_2020.pdf (accessed: 14.05.2025); Global Innovation Index 2024 : Unlocking the Promise of Social Entrepreneurship : 17th edition / ed. by S. Dutta, B. Lanvin, L. R. León, S. Wunsch-Vincent. Geneva : WIPO, 2024. P. 18. URL: https://www.wipo.int/web-publications/global-innovation-index-2024/assets/67729/2000%20Global%20Innovation%20Index%202024_WEB3lite.pdf (accessed: 14.05.2025).

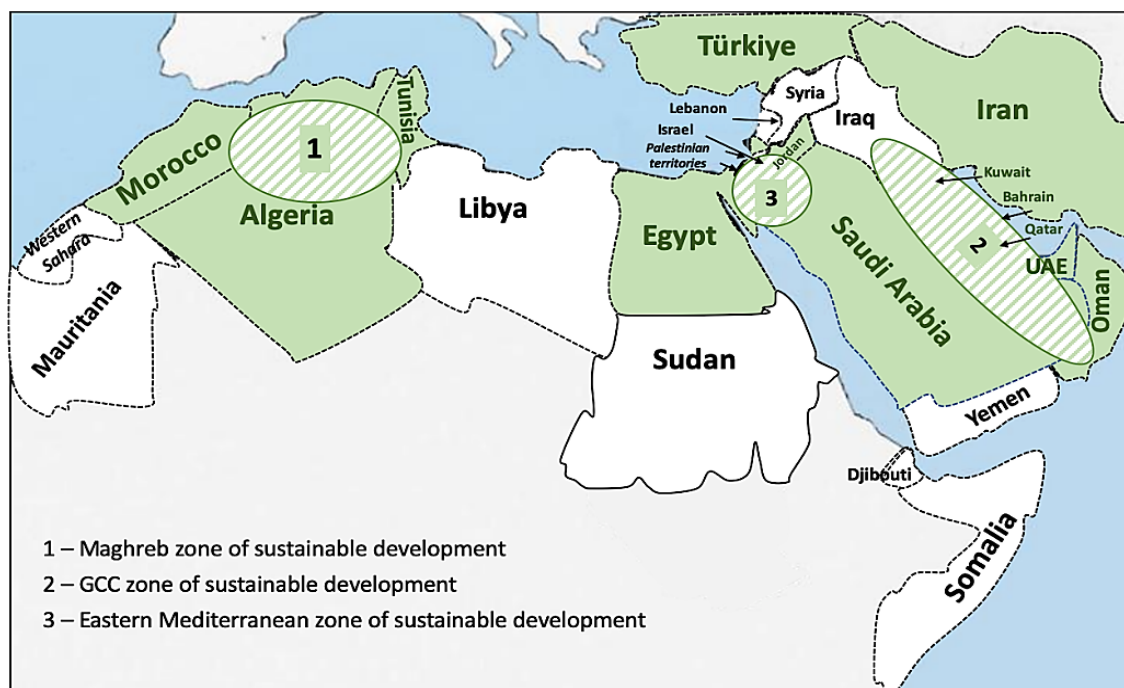


Figure 5. Zones and foci of sustainable development in the MENA macroregion:
the states with FSD are marked by light while the ZSDs are marked with strokes.

Source: compiled by I.A. Matveev.

A cross-examination of the estimates covering 17 SDGs and innovations for 2020 and 2024 (those years are taken by the author to show the updated dynamics overlapping a five-year period), shows the following palette of FSD and ZSDs (Figure 5).

In Maghreb, a ZSD was formed in Algeria (in 2020–2024, it came down from the 2nd to the 5th place in R1, remaining on the 15th place in R2; hereafter, the rating positions in the MENA macro-region are indicated), Morocco (it came up from the 5th to the 3rd place in R1 and from the 8th place to the 7th place in R2), and Tunisia (it dropped down from the 4th place to the 12th place in R2, rising from the 4th place to the 2nd place in R1). Taking into account the political tensions between Algeria and Morocco, which constitute the main obstacle to integration within the Arab Maghreb Union established in 1989 (Frolova, 2017, p. 140), it is more appropriate to speak of a sub-regional ZSD here (zone 1 in Figure 5) than a cross-border one.

While acknowledging many unresolved economic problems, one could recognize the existence of a FSD in Egypt, which rose from the 10th place to the 7th place in R1 and from the 14th place to the 13th place in R2. Since the

1970s, the economic strategy of open doors (*infithah*) has been in place, enjoying the US's annual financial assistance for military needs worth USD 1.3 billion (Savchenko, 2023, p. 117).

In the Eastern Mediterranean, FSD emerged in Israel (occupying the 1st place in both R1 and P2), Jordan (climbing from the 11th place to the 8th place in R1 while from the 11th place to the 10th place in R2), with reservation in Lebanon (whereas FSD exists only in the major cities of Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, and Zahlé⁴⁰) (due to the internal crisis, Lebanon went down from the 12th place to the 14th place in R1 and from the 13th place to the 14th place in R2), and Türkiye (the country is consistently ranked 6th in R1 and 3rd in R2). The existence of a FSD in the Palestinian West Bank, the economy of which is closely linked to Israel, remains under question. Taking into account the existing cooperation between Israel and Jordan in innovation, water resources, and energy,⁴¹ it is possible to discuss the genesis of the Israeli-Jordanian cross-border ZSD.

⁴⁰ This information is based on the author's field research in Lebanon.

⁴¹ Israel and Jordan Signed the Project "Water in Exchange for Energy" // IA Krasnaya Vesna. November 8,

As for Iran, its “resistance economy” has been demonstrating primary signs of FSD due to diversification, import substitution, and experience in bypassing sanctions (due to the internal economic crisis, the country dropped from the 3rd place to the 9th place in R1, while maintaining a stable 6th place in R2).

It is not yet clear whether a FSD is developing in Iraq, whereas sustainable development programs are implemented with the help of international organizations and the GCC monarchies, but amidst the remaining monocultural economy with the oil share reaching 95% of the exports (Batool & Ibrahim, 2023, p. 189). Iraq has moved up from 16th to the 13th place in R1, but is missing from R2.

Most importantly, FSD emerged in the Persian Gulf sub-region. There are six of them matching the number of the GCC monarchies. As there is an acting integration body represented by the Gulf Cooperation Council, while the approaches to the SDGs look quite similar despite the nuances (embodied by the catching up development model based on *infatih* and economic diversification), one could acknowledge the genesis of a cross-border ZSD here. However, according to R1 and R2, the results of achieving the SDGs and implementing innovations vary from country to country. The UAE remains the leader, rising c from 7th place to 4th place in R1 and keeping the stable 2nd place after Israel in R2.

By comparing the Geoschemes in Figure 1 and Figure 2 with those in Figure 5, it becomes evident that FSD and ZSDs are often geographically located close to conflicts. For example, the FSD in Morocco is adjacent to the Western Sahara conflict zone. Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia share borders with Libya. Egypt shares a border with the Gaza Strip and Israel. All this creates risks for the sustainable development of these countries in terms of investment and logistics. In Lebanon, which is a hostage of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, the implementation of the FSD is under threat. Iran faces an alarming situation, since its efforts under the SDGs could be buried

in case of a transition from the current proxy war to open conflict with Israel. The situation looks somewhat better in Türkiye, which is geographically remote from the conflicts and, as a trade “hub,” benefits from the Ukrainian conflict. The biggest losers from a large-scale war would be the GCC monarchies, which have already spent many billions of US dollars for the SDGs. This forces them to refrain from escalation with Israel, while monitoring Iran and continuing to strengthen their defense capabilities with the help of the United States.

Conclusion

Reviewing DDSs, conflicts, FSD, and ZSDs enabled the author to define a Deeply Divided Region. It represents a geopolitical and geoeconomic space with a system of international relations, characterized by the presence of multiple deeply divided societies, along with internal, interstate, and hybrid conflicts, and at the same time by the genesis of foci and zones of sustainable development.

The author compiled the Geoschemes of DDSs / conflicts and FSD / ZSDs, as well as the scales of intensity and internationalization of conflicts (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). In the future, he plans to specify these scales with the development of a point system for evaluating the criteria (duration, list of participants, number of victims, refugees, etc.).

Comparing the Geoschemes with each other and the scales enabled the author to conclude that there is a high probability, but at the same time not an inevitability of the scenario of a large-scale war in the MENA space before the end of 2025. Annual analyses of the current situation, monitoring the dynamics and risks of escalation, could also be useful in the future.

The overwhelming majority of MENA countries do have deeply divided societies, which in six cases (Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Somalia, and Sudan) have provoked internal conflicts. However, DDSs alone don't inspire critical fragility of MENA. This was proved by the “Arab spring,” which, despite similar problems in a number of countries led to a radical change of leaders and authorities in only four countries (with certain limits Egypt,

2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/f2a5e758> (accessed: 17.11.2024).

whereas the special role of the military in society was preserved, as well as in Yemen, Libya, taking into account the critical importance of external intervention, and Tunisia).

The diversity and growing interdependence of conflicts in the region and beyond form a destabilizing factor, causing geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts. This increases the degree of unpredictability of the situation, as a result creating, although, fortunately, until now limited risks of an incidental *casus belli* for a large-scale war. For example, Türkiye's intervention in Libya moves the Libyan conflict from the orbit of Maghreb to the orbit of the Eastern Mediterranean, while the Ukrainian crisis provokes volatility in food markets, hiding risks of a new "Arab Spring." The domino effect of the war in Gaza has already inspired Israel's clashes with Iran, Hezbollah, and the Houthis.

The new "sustainable development belt" encompassing the ZSD in the Persian Gulf with a possible Iran's involvement, if a real and final rapprochement is achieved between Tehran and Riyadh, along with the FSD in Maghreb, Egypt, and Türkiye, becomes a counterbalance to the conflict potential of the region. Long-lasting peace is becoming the main imperative, as illustrated by the Abraham Accords of 2020–2021 related to the normalization of relations of Bahrain, Morocco, and the UAE with Israel. Neither the failure of Washington's efforts to "pacify" MENA on a monetary basis, nor the war in Gaza, have changed this new reality.

After 2025, the situation is likely to improve or deteriorate. One couldn't rule out the first, i.e. positive scenario, as determined by the successful implementation of the SDGs, launching global logistics projects, and rapprochements between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Israel and Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, the second, i.e. negative scenario could be triggered by a critical increase in the interdependence and randomness of conflicts, as well as a return to zero-sum games, if the same Iranians are forced to abandon the doctrine of "strategic patience" in favor of open conflict with Israel.

In sum, it seems appropriate to present a number of recommendations for the

implementation of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation.

1. *At the macro-regional level*, to enhance coordination of Russian government authorities, the Russian Export Center, and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation with national academic centers to identify risks and prospects for dialogues with MENA countries, modalities of their participation in multilateral formats through the prism of the hierarchy of national interests, and the degree of their readiness for partnership with Russia.

2. *At the regional and sub-regional level*, taking into account the evolution of conflicts and FSD / ZSDs, specify with the involvement of Russian embassies, trade representations, and individual experts, priority areas, including new ones for trade and economic cooperation with MENA countries as divided into sub-regions.

3. *At the country level*, to formulate proposals to enhance the role of Russia in the light of the imperatives of sustainable development, integration, and cooperation. It means searching for the patterns of peaceful settlement of internal conflicts (in Yemen, Libya, or possibly starting from 2026 or later, again in Syria), as well as the ways to move forward in solving the Palestinian problem (encouraging contacts between Palestinian factions and resuming the work of the Middle East Quartet).

In this regard, Russia's positive experience in Syria offers a promising model for resolving internal conflicts. First of all, it is about the "security matrix" model, being developed by the author of the study. The essence is to create decent conditions for reviving social and economic life via Russian military police's presence "on the ground." One couldn't rule out that starting from 2025, despite the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, concrete achievements related to political de-escalation at the local level could become useful in the context of other conflicts in the Arab world, for example, in Libya and Sudan, as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa, namely, in Niger, Mali, and the Central African Republic.

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