



As the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) marks its twentieth year, the region once again stands at a historic turning point.

ARI was born in the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, a moment when a “New Middle East” was first promoted by the US through military intervention and externally driven transformation. The US promised democratic renewal on the back of a military invasion but instead unleashed cycles of fragmentation, polarization, violence, and deep societal rupture that rippled through the region. Iran exploited this fragmentation to promote its armed proxies, which came to dominate political life in Lebanon and Iraq. For more than two decades, regional order was defined by this contest between an Iran-centered axis of influence and a US-backed security framework aligned with Israel and key Arab states.

Today, another attempt to reshape the region is unfolding through force. While the premises were announced with the defeat of Hezbollah and the fall of the Assad regime in 2024, the main act is unfolding in the current war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran. What will eventually emerge is not yet fully settled. However, the penciled outlines suggest a new regional order framed around Israeli and US security dominance, described by some as a renewed *Pax Americana*, or more accurately a *Pax Israelica* fully backed by a pliant US. This new order is being built without even a pretense or lip service to democratic governance. It is articulated shamelessly around the expansionist aspirations of Israel and is irredeemably tainted by its genocide in Gaza.

In the current context, the region's countries and peoples are being pressured into stark choices: align with Israel and the United States, or risk war, sanctions, and prolonged instability. At the same time, Iran's regional posture has hardly offered an alternative path. Through its network of armed allies and proxies, Tehran has regularly advanced its own strategic interests at the expense of state sovereignty and social cohesion in countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, contributing to deep political and economic deterioration. Iran's recent decision to target critical infrastructure in Gulf countries has significantly deepened distrust and resentment toward its regional role.

Few in the region will mourn the erosion of Iranian influence. Yet this does not translate into an embrace of a new Israeli-dominated regional order imposed through military supremacy. Even the Gulf states, long perceived as insulated through economic leverage and strategic diplomacy, now find themselves exposed and strategically constrained, as the Israeli attack on Doha reminded everyone. Smaller and conflict-affected countries such as Lebanon and Syria face even narrower margins for maneuver.

The language of inevitability is returning. The idea that the region's future will be decided elsewhere. The assumption that societies, already exhausted by repeated wars and economic turmoil, must simply absorb the consequences of wars they did not choose.

But history suggests otherwise. Every externally designed "new Middle East" has ultimately collided with local political realities. Israel experienced this after its Lebanon invasion in 1982. The US experienced it after its more recent invasion of Iraq. Military power can redraw alliances and alter balances. It can temporarily mute demands, but it ultimately cannot erase demands for dignity, local agency, and justice.

So if a new regional order is indeed emerging, its durability will depend not only on military outcomes but also on whether it creates space for accountable and inclusive governance and societal participation.

There are multiple trajectories ahead. One is a militarized stabilization in which security pacts and deterrence dominate political life through coopted elites and sheer force and technology. A second, more difficult today but ultimately more sustainable, is one in which societies, civic actors, and reformers insist that regional security cannot be separated from governance reform and social justice. It is a vision for a region where local interests are prioritized and prosperity is promoted for the many, not the few.

There are dimensions of the current escalation that lie beyond the control of local actors. But the region's future is not entirely predetermined. Agency today may take quieter forms: protecting civic space; sustaining independent research and dialogue; linking security debates to governance reform; holding on to demands for justice even when the immediate outlook is not promising; and grounding policy conversations in lived realities. Holding on to this agency matters.

The Middle East that emerges from this moment will not be defined solely by which states prevail militarily. It will also be shaped by whether societies retain the ability to participate in defining their own futures. Ultimately, no regional settlement will endure without societal inclusion.

As a research organization rooted in the Arab region, our commitment is to remain engaged in radical acts of political imagination and to remember that the peoples of this region are not spectators in history. They can and must remain its authors, especially when the region is going through such massive changes. We know the challenges of such a task. Escalations in violence have reshaped our staff and partners' lives with painful immediacy. But this direct exposure has also meant that we have witnessed how externally driven projects often underestimate local complexity. We have also seen, and experienced, how civic engagement persists even under repression and conflict.



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